Dos

PANDORA'S YOUNG MEN

NEW NOVELS

AN IMPERFECT MOTHER
J. D. BERESFORD

THE CHEATS
MARJORIE BOWEN

HARVEST
MRS HUMPHRY WARD

DENYS THE DREAMER
KATHARINE TYNAN

THE BOOK OF YOUTH
MARGARET SKELTON

MARY-GIRL
HOPE MERRICK

PANDORA'S YOUNG MEN

by

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TO MY WIFE

CHAPTER I

WITH more than an instinct of calamity James Fullerton watched the stout gentleman on the platform eye his empty carriage. He had known at once there was no hope. The carriage on each side was empty. Both were smokers. This one in which he sat, with a painstaking air of isolation and hostility, was, according to the ridiculous hypotheses of travellers, the kind of carriage to be avoided by cigars, pipes, and cigarettes, and into whose lonely precincts, on a non-stop run, no lady of prudence would venture.

The stout gentleman passed on. But he had seen. He progressed slowly up the train with the air of a man attending his own conference. He carried with him an impression of a clean shaven, keen looking young man, probably a barrister, evidently well to do. He liked the look of James Fullerton. There was something modest and at the same time intelligent about him. Interesting. . . . Probably been at the War. . . . Decidedly must have been at the War.

The stout gentleman perambulated back. James Fullerton decided to act according to the first lesson in the book of Tactics for Solitary Travellers, which every railway stall should stock, but doesn't. He left the carriage by the corridor as the stout gentleman entered and laid his book upon the vacant corner seat of the smoker next door. Then he looked at his watch. Only two minutes. With outward composure he left the carriage and strolled up the train. The stout gentleman, reassured by the Fullerton suit-case, waited with

Christian fortitude. He had no papers, so he simply stared placidly out of the window.

When James returned, an elderly clergyman was seated opposite the Fullerton book, and the whistle was blowing. In the only remaining smoker an ardent young subaltern was hoisting a dubious retriever upon the opposite seat. The book of Tactics for Solitary Travellers brackets dog lovers and clergymen with children as the grave but obvious perils which need no comment. They do not, that is to say, call for the trained intuition to pick out at a glance the chronic conversationalist, the open window menace, or the passenger with a railway chicken and a bottle minus a corkscrew.

James joined the stout person, and, without any sense of hope, commenced to read with an air of extraordinary concentration which would have charmed and endeared him to the author. It was a novel propelled into his hand by a pretty but unscrupulous young lady at the library. Every one is familiar with the appalling moment when the name of every book and author vanishes in the turmoil of a flying visit to Mudies' or *The Times*. He had an instinct against the book. He disliked the jacket. He had a vague disregard for the author. He suspected the publisher. But the florid face of a large, impatient lady behind him, the sight of her clutching to her furs, loosely strapped together, a multitude of heavy sellers had overwhelmed him. . . .

'You like that book?' inquired the stout gentleman with a touch of succulence.

James started. It was a peculiar question to be shot at one out of the unseen. He thought the book rotten. But the old splendid caution of the Fullertons did not desert him.

'Quite,' he replied over the top, and smiled the pleasant disarming Fullerton smile.

'I'm glad,' said the stout gentleman reflectively, and added with horrible archness, 'as the author——'

The mind of James Fullerton was sandbagged. The wretched thing fluttered in his fingers. He was certain the book of Tactics for Solitary Travellers had never contemplated one of its subscribers might encounter an author like that. He wished publishers would always reproduce the face of the author on the jacket, so that unsuspecting travellers might be able to murmur, 'I'll swear that's Smithers with the flapping bird's-eye tie'—and hurry into the unknown. But publishers say the reading public faced with such grim realities would melt like winter snow.

Long after, he was aware the stout gentleman was talking. He continued to talk. He was a very highly coloured person between fifty and sixty, with an abundance of gray hair, and protruding, flamboyant blue eyes. And it was as though James Fullerton had unwittingly set a match to a human bonfire. It pained, it alarmed him, to see the ravages of his gross carelessness. A pretty business if this elderly stranger, possibly the father of a family, went on like that and took apoplexy before he could stop the train.

'I *am* interested,' he said soothingly, feeling some steps ought to be taken.

'How long do you think I took to write that book,' gasped the author, who appeared to be asthmatical, blowing out his billowy moustaches. From the little James Fullerton had read he would have said about an hour, but he was a humane man.

'Six months?' he asked.

The author steamed with delight.

'Ten days,' he replied. 'Six thousand a day. Not bad——'

'You astonish me,' said James, and, stealing a

hurried glance at the wrapper, 'you amaze me, Mr Randolph——'

'Author of *Mr Randolph*,' corrected the author, caressing the book and with a distinct note of displeasure. 'My name's Pinnock.'

With a flush of shame James hastened to add that 'the name of Pinnock——'

'But as you know I write under a pseudonym——'

'Oh, damn,' muttered James, now altogether broken and despondent.

But Mr Pinnock rallied. He spoke of his first books and his last books and the books under contract. He did not forget his American sales, or his Colonial sales, or the fact that *Harriet's Honeymoon* had been translated into Dutch, Portuguese, Pomeranian, Basuto. . . . His voice went on and on. He swayed nearer and nearer, and his massive moustaches trembled and sagged like sails in a rising wind.

Satisfied Mr Pinnock was as happy as could be expected, James brooded over a question which had haunted him for a quarter of a century, or nearly so. From his earliest recollections he had been the kind of person to whom people spoke, to whom confidences came out like soda water from a bottle, spluttering and gaseous. As an only son he had been compelled to listen for hours to his poor father, and at school to entirely nasty other little boys with their quite boring imagined prowess. But if *he* ever made up a jolly little adventure he could not hold them. There was something missing somewhere. It had been the same only worse at Cambridge. And ever since years of maturity, when he was armed to the teeth against inviting the smallest attention or interest, the persecution had carried on. He was an obvious mark in the Club, but he was a far greater martyr in the snug sitting-room or library of some one else's house. The hours of tedium he had suffered, the

intolerable melancholy hours spent with other people's most secret, most credible (they all said he wouldn't believe it), most colourless crises. He had clung to one straw after another. He had contrived a manner so rude that people knew he was the strong but tender man of tradition. He had taken refuge behind a garrulity as certain knowledgeable fish eject a cloud of ink. He had worn a moustache and parted his hair down the middle. He had shaved and bought one of those winged collars and bow ties associated with the official mind. With each adjustment he certainly discomfited the old. But he made new friends who whispered interminably their normal and somnolent disclosures.

It must be admitted that his father, that brilliant but overshadowed man, had forewarned him of the awful, the remorseless future. There is no need here to remark that, as the son of the great Bishop Fullerton, the father of James was expected to be somebody. He was somebody, but, in this perplexing world of reactions, not the kind of somebody the public was pleased to expect. He was not even an echo, however faint, of his illustrious father, and the irreverent man on the street nurses conventional expectations. The name of Fullerton endured and will endure. The books, hymns, anecdotes, traditions of that terrific Anglican are good for another quarter century. They will outlive James Fullerton. They will haunt his offspring. The sins of the fathers in virtue persist with an endurance, a snap, and a relentless vigour quite undreamt of in vice. . . .

'I never read that,' admitted James, with the air of a man who can afford to miss one now and again.

The heritage of Bishop Fullerton was bad enough, but it had struck him at an early age that the name of James was unkind of some one. It is a common, a respected, a historic name, and by itself appears to afford quiet satisfaction to many ratepayers. But if anything was

required to counteract the Fullerton it was a note of levity and agnosticism. George has long been the white man's burden, but it is better than James. It is at the worst imbecile, and with a fine stage tradition for light farce. It had seemed to him in his darkest hours that even Percy or Algie or Herbert would have strengthened his arm. But James . . .

He had reproached his father with hot thoughtless words, just as though he was responsible for the Bishop, instead of that great man having begat, to his intense mortification and spiritual penance—Humphrey—his poor unhappy father. The incident had been a painful one on both sides. Humphrey said things about his father which James thought no grandson, however dissatisfied, should tolerate unchallenged. Which Humphrey countered by a melancholy reflection that he had not imagined the day would come when even his son would insult him.

'But why,' he had parried, 'James, and, not satisfied with that, add Pettigrew. Why Pettigrew?'

His unfortunate father was bowed with shame. 'I did it for the best,' he had murmured. 'All my life I have struggled to make my own living, lead my own life, just be a man, not a Fullerton. It was a hopeless fight. I had no chance and I had no money. I—we, your mother and I, thought that perhaps your grand-uncle, James Fullerton, who was a leading Scotch lawyer and a bachelor. . . . He married,' concluded Humphrey mournfully, 'when it was too late. The Pettigrew is grandmamma . . .'

The Pettigrew was still grandmamma. . . .

'I often think authors are a carnivorous race,' Mr Pinnock was remarking with sly jocosity.

'Oh,' said James politely.

'We are never content until we know all about a person. It's the creative mind. An insatiable curiosity.

We leave people knowing who they are, what they are doing—*everything*. And give nothing ourselves. We can't help it. I plead guilty,' laughed Mr Pinnock noisily, and then became quite suddenly portentously grave. 'The truth is,' he said, in a muted voice, 'we men of letters are tired. *Brain fag*. Our greatest relief is to let other people talk. By a quiet and appropriate comment at the proper moment I have frequently travelled a long journey like this without any mental strain. I listen. I turn things over. I get ideas. I recall at a public dinner given in my honour in America I began to speak . . .'

Mr Pinnock went on speaking.

So there it was. James Pettigrew Fullerton, the kind of name associated for ever with the tremendous background of the eminent Fullerton and in itself the kind of appendage to be carried with propriety and awe. It was the classic tragedy of the tail wagging the dog. People made up their minds about James before they saw him. They refused to tolerate his miserable struggling efforts for freedom. And those older ones were never tired of reminding him that he resembled the great man. He had inherited the rather prominent nose, the fine forehead, the deep-set eyes. It was a case of Jekyll and Hyde, with Hyde a sleeping partner.

'But some day,' ruminated James, staring with indignation at Mr Pinnock, 'some day . . .' He was at a loss to say just what he'd do. Something tremendous.

There was a discreet cough in the corridor. The clergyman was stealing in. Mr Pinnock gave him an unwelcome glance. The clergyman sat down. He was quite elderly and outwardly inoffensive. His mild blue eyes wandered round the carriage like aimless flies on a summer's day. Suddenly they stood at gaze. They narrowed. They began to glow. James wondered if Mr Pinnock was aware that the elderly clergyman

appeared unwell. But the author was sulking. His moustaches had drooped and fallen slack. The elderly clergyman craned his neck and stared with painful concentration at the rack just above the head of James. His mouth had fallen a little open, his nose was wrinkled, his eyes lambent. To the enormous relief of James the train was actually drawing up. In a moment all would be over. Whether the elderly clergyman would murder Mr Pinnock was not his concern.

He rose to his feet.

'I *must* ask,' pleaded the elderly clergyman with the disarming deference of a man who sees his way.

'I beg your pardon,' said James, rather flustered.

The elderly clergyman pointed with a trembling hand at the name on the suit case.

'Not—not a connection of the Bishop?' he inquired, in the tone of one mentioning the Almighty.

The train had stopped like an answer to prayer. James could afford to be magnanimous.

'I may mention,' pursued the elderly clergyman, 'I was an intimate friend—though a junior, ah, yes—quite a junior—of Bishop Fullerton. I can recall——'

James was sure he could. He felt perfectly confident he could go on recalling for about six hours. But he wasn't going to—no, by jingo, he wasn't.

'And to think I have to get out,' he said heartily, 'to think I may never have this chance again. If I had only known you were in the next carriage——'

That thought was too awful for words. He broke off and hurriedly alighted. As the whistle blew, his natural courtesy sent him back to the window.

'Let me introduce Mr Pinnock,' he said. 'Mr Pinnock is an author to whom the name of Bishop Fullerton must convey much. I am generous, sir. Tell him those little intimate sidelights I have lost. I will think of you both,' shouted James, waving his hand.

As the train moved out he caught a glimpse of the elderly clergyman facing Mr Pinnock with the proprietary air of a man about to dine.

Then turning he found a dogcart on to which a fellow traveller was climbing.

'Are you from Lady Pennington?' he asked the groom, and jumping up behind sniffed in the pleasant autumn air. 'Every moment,' he thought cosily to himself, 'is carrying me nearer Pandora——'

CHAPTER II

I

THE mournful countenance of the butler was the only shadow flung across the smiling autumn garden. From the mullioned library window it gazed without rancour or malice or any emotion save composed melancholy upon a world given over to sunshine and the Sussex weald. From the library window he could command the terrace and the drive and the lodge, where Mrs James was opening the gates in preparation for the arrival of Mr Richard Pennington, and some young man—name of Fullerton—yes, Fullerton. Turning his head he was aware that the gardener, a well-meaning man from the village of Shooters Green near by, was earthing up the celery not merely clumsily but several weeks too late. With a faint sigh, he recalled that he had warned Lady Pennington in August that she should be forewarned. He had also gone out of his way to refer to the necessity of vine pruning, which had been shamefully neglected in 1918, the purchasing of bulbs for the coming spring (if there was a spring), and the prevention of the ravages of the winter moth by the precautionary adoption of grease bands around the stems of fruit-trees. He had even written the name of the preparation he preferred upon a piece of paper which he had afterwards found on the linoleum of the bathroom. To Blinkhorn watching, without ridicule or anger, the gardener's blunderings it seemed a pity—in view of the future—that Lady Pennington should fail to appreciate how much

she might regret the lack of a little forethought some day, but he had felt it his duty to speak and having spoken he could do no more. Not that he desired to operate in person in the garden, or was ever seen beyond the terrace where, in the course of his office, he conveyed tea and strawberries, and, without raising his eyes to the beds and walks and remote vegetables he knew with such amazing intimacy, withdrew.

Mr Pennington's train was evidently late, or more probably it was the fault of the groom. Blinkhorn was inclined to blame the latter. Being a man of accurate and organised mind he had taken the opportunity afforded by the library window of comparing the appearance of the distant puff of smoke with his watch. It was a fact—whatever Lady Pennington might care to imagine—that the train was (Blinkhorn admitted it phenomenal) up to time. Moreover, while he was examining the miniature Stuart writing-bureau delivered an hour ago and purchased by Miss Pandora as a little surprise for her mother (there was a procession of such little surprises ranging from a Jersey cow to a portable boiler)—he had distinctly heard the bang of the corn bin, indicating that Rupert, the young cob (a little surprise for Lady Pennington and still acting splendidly up to its original purpose), had only been fed twenty minutes before he took the road. Here again Blinkhorn had taken a suitable opportunity of remarking to Lady Pennington that stable routine must be rigorous or nothing, and that if Cruttenden, who wore a Newgate fringe, was born in Shooters Green when memories of smuggling were ripe, and spoke fluently in an obscure tongue no one understood, was also expected very shortly (so he believed) to drive a second-hand two-seater, very lofty in construction and with a diminutive bonnet, he gave it as his opinion that the matter called for consideration. He concluded that he had, of course,

no personal knowledge of the horse, though he suspected it of splints in the right fore leg and cracked heels—he simply wanted, in view of the future, to help where he could.

To the right, by craning his neck a little, he was able to note without actual discomfort the belated and futile efforts of his mistress, Lady Pennington, whose traditions and figure were late Victorian, to induce a party of Runner Ducks to return home before the arrival of her brother-in-law. In Lady Pennington's youth, ducks did many things but they never ran. They were also to be found nourishing themselves on unpleasing succulence by uncleanly ponds. They could be located and herded slowly homewards in true pastoral fashion. But these new-fangled ducks (a surprise from Pandora to guide her mother's steps off the worries of the village Peace Celebrations) disdained the paths of their fathers. They leaped the childish enclosure laboriously and ineffectually pegged down by the stooping form of Lady Pennington, and without a pause, without a farewell glance, they coursed across the paddock and fought their way into the wood. It was, as Blinkhorn had taken the liberty of remarking at the time, highly improbable that they would return. He had joined the disconsolate group on the terrace and drawn the attention of Lady Pennington to the structure of the Runner Duck, laboriously developed by earnest persons for a purpose now obvious to all. He added that as one who had been a pioneer of the movement, had his opinion been sought, he could have saved her ladyship considerable pains and expense. And all that day he had been the means of conveying hectic messages through the telephone to Lady Pennington. That a Runner Duck had galloped over the vicarage lawn at Great Widdlecombe and headed towards Rye; that the Vet. in avoiding a Runner Duck had abandoned his car on the high road to Robertsbridge;

that a fox had been seen ominously asleep Bodiam. . . .

Blinkhorn, watching his mistress, permitted him a faint and not unfriendly smile and realised that Mr Pennington been sufficiently agile to mount dogcart, which in the highly-strung condition of Rupe temperament was questionable, he would have the opp tunity of a little chat on the political condition America, from which country Mr Pennington had j returned after a period of official work. It may be s at once that Blinkhorn had his own views regardi America. He had, since the death of Sir Peter Penni ton, the eminent K.C., voiced the sentiments of right-minded men of strictly average intellect. He h that is to say, digested the current news downstairs a up with especial attention to the short, ominous leade and then proceeded to concentrate upon it all in a spi of irreproachable mediocrity.

From along the lane came the swift, businesslike tr of Rupert, who must be kept on the move up-hill a down if possible for fear he met a traction carrying woo Confronted, at a walk, with such a splendid, smoki creature, charged with thunder and rattling like a tan Rupert simply turned and left. He had no confiden in Cruttenden, and he laid his money on the tractio Pushed manfully towards the enemy, however, e couraged with Sussex threats and Sussex whipcor Rupert became a prey to indecision. The eyes of t visitor rested mournfully upon the ditch, his han gripped the rail, the traction roared alongside—the was a poignant moment in which Rupert crouched li a wild beast at bay and then rearing finely became, f a moment, the kind of horse eminent makers of histo ride so complacently in public squares. With the omn potence of such things the traction thundered on, heed less, indifferent, carrying out its great destiny, leavin

wreckage and anguish behind. To Rupert, who was born and bred in Wiltshire, and therefore had a proper contempt for Cruttenden, the incident was usually rounded off with a jolly little gallop along the ditch, a jump into the road again, and a brisk breather home. And when the welcome gates of Shooters Hurst were sighted, the guest, be he stockbroker or bishop, marshalled his departed courage with that pathos so peculiarly the birthright of the townsman, and with expansive gestures said, 'he only needed a bit of handling,' that 'there is no vice there, only spirit, and you don't want to sit behind a slug,' and told with growing body and confidence as the terrace was neared, several untrue and improbable anecdotes of achievements in the saddle. To all of which Cruttenden, who was a realist and frankly terrified, and, moreover, who could not understand foreigners from London, paid no attention at all but reiterated again and again, with the knowledge that Rupert would probably rush straight for the stable door (to which the visitor was mercifully blind for the present), 'Näw—Näw,' early Saxon words of comfort and expectation.

II

Richard Pennington possessed those amiable qualities which no Government can afford to overlook and no list of Birthday Honours ignore. As an infant he had moved discreetly about his nursery, too juvenile to soothe with reasoned words the undisciplined temper of his nurse, but, by his very quietude, a bland and calming influence. In his boyhood, when his father, the eminent Canon Archibald Pennington was gravelled for a touch of pathos in his memorial sermon upon the death of Canon Weekes, whom he had opposed and detested for a quarter of a century—Richard had laid a hand upon his knee. Nothing more. That his father, a passionate Christian,

had boxed his ears has been repeated by evil minded persons, but those who are familiar with that wonderful tribute to Canon Weekes and its last peroration on the serenity of the after-life can read between the lines.

The name of Richard Pennington will surely be associated with Winchester and Balliol, simply because it is the proud and benignant purpose of these places to nurture Richard Penningtons for the preservation of this country. They move about their high calling this little band of Penningtons, unrecognised and unseen, recorded, it may be, in a sixteen-shilling net volume of reminiscences but nothing more. In the Houses of Parliament, who, in slow and fatigued accents, cools the atmosphere after a fervid Celtic battlecry? A Pennington. At a Conference, when something that might be right or might be wrong, and might combine the two, is being rushed through with indecorous haste, who begs to query a figure and appoint a sub-committee to inquire into it and deliver a report? A Pennington.

The tragedy was a Pennington dead. For thirty years Lady Pennington had lived with only a vague thankfulness for the perfection of married life and never fully appreciated in its immensity that between her and both the storms and snappy breezes of human existence there had been expanded like a full-bellied Victorian umbrella —a Pennington.

The late Sir Peter Pennington possessed the curiously rigid and detached outlook on life associated with the period, a standard firmly rooted in religious intuition on the one hand and supported by legal practice on the other. Upon every situation Sir Peter felt competent to pass a verdict. When Lady Pennington, even then a stout woman with a mind like a permanent pageant, burst in upon him with large loose gestures, smothered sobs for breath, distracted laughter, and a crisis in the kitchen, Sir Peter turned in his chair, considered the

scraps of disconnected dialogue, asked one or two leading questions and summed up. To the domestics he was a very fair anticipation of the Judgment Day, but to his wife, whom he encouraged according to his age to remain quietly out at grass, he was a very present help, and must therefore have possessed upon both counts some, at least, of the attributes of the Almighty. Behind that protection the years had passed in placid, methodical domesticity broken by occasional parties, by holidays, when Pandora was begged to behave like other little girls and didn't, and the departure of Uncle Geoffrey for the 'Great Boer War,' as it was reverently called, which afforded them the grim, and not altogether unpleasing, sensation of martial doings in a far-off land. It was at that period that Lady Pennington, being a woman of large unchecked impulses, sat daily at her ample desk (perpetually littered with bills, socks for soldiers, Pandora's lessons, and long, closely-written letters from her band of equally verbose intimates, letters on both sides full of gross aspersions on leading politicians and unpardonable anecdotes reflecting very gravely on British generals), and one spring morning, being in a fervour over an article reprinted from a French paper, couched in terms neither of admiration nor friendship, wrote with hardly a pause those verses which, in the carefully chosen words of the publisher—an honest, but a business man—'created so much comment throughout the Empire.' Few perhaps recall to-day the poem, 'Who dares to twist the tail of the Lion,' and the satisfaction of all religious denominations that the word 'Sion,' concluding the third line, so blameless in metre, was also so full of comfort and promise to all right-minded persons. It is extraordinary how the time passes in the composition of helpful verse of a Low Church flavour. That, and cosy teas with earnest ladies all very anxious to induce the labouring classes to live big thoughtful lives. Years passed. Pandora grew into

girlhood. She was already affording stabs of surprise and pain to her mother, when, quite suddenly, two memorable things happened. Sir Peter died, and the War broke out.

And instantly Lady Pennington was isolated, stranded, marooned, looking back upon a protector who had vanished, and with him a world (her world) utterly, perhaps eternally, submerged.

III

That may explain why Lady Pennington closed the door with the satisfactory knowledge that here, standing by the window, his tall drooping figure bent over a book, his thin fingers playing with his clean-shaven chin, was one whose sole desire in life, being like all true Penningtons a bachelor and fifty, was to be charming, tactful, firm (some even say obstinate), and in fact a kind of deliberate confessor without purgatorial perquisites.

'My dear Richard.'

'Ah, Mary,' cried Mr Pennington in his soft pleasant voice, and, laying down the book, took her hand in both of his with a charming little gesture.

'I was in the garden, Richard. I hope Blinkhorn attended to you. Have you had tea?'

'He was good enough to say he will bring it here. It is like old times to see him back again.'

'Blinkhorn? Yes. He was demobilised ten months ago——'

'And has not changed? Or has he——?'

Lady Pennington hesitated.

'Here you are just back from America,' she said quickly, 'and you talk of Blinkhorn. Blinkhorn's down on this bit of paper. But he comes later——'

'Oh——?'

'Yes. Peter used to say, "There's no one like Richard

for giving advice." And, my dear Richard, I've kept a little book with troublesome questions. Do you mind?'

'I shall be only too charmed,' said Mr Pennington, with an effort, 'and Pandora——'

'Pandora,' echoed her mother with dramatic reticence.

'She was,' remarked Mr Pennington guardedly, and sipping his tea, 'quite a child when I saw her last. She must be what—twenty?'

Lady Pennington stared at him for a moment in the same perturbed manner.

'I recall her little earnest face,' continued Mr Pennington, bridging an awkward silence in his delightful fashion. 'I have often thought what a difference she must make to your life now Peter is gone. A wonderfully thoughtful and sympathetic nature——'

A little discomposed by the voluminous silence into which his sister-in-law had succumbed he made another little rally. Laying down his cup he cast a cheerful glance around the room, and through the open window towards the dahlias.

'Now tell me, Mary—how in the world did you pick up this wonderful place? What an amazing woman you are. Here have I looked upon you as inseparably wedded to London and literary concerns, and if you will permit me—not altogether sympathetic with either country pursuits or period furniture. And yet——' and with an amused little gesture Mr Pennington pointed first at a priceless specimen of a writing-bureau which must have been a remarkable setting for a delicate Stuart child unable to write but not for Lady Pennington, and then at the fine old open grate which devoured coal in buckets and for some obscure reason ignored a chimney with the accommodation of a ship's funnel.

To which Lady Pennington made a wide and helpless gesture, and then with the same tragic reticence uttered again the same sonorous word 'Pandora.'

CHAPTER III

THEY trudged down the grass walk and back again. They approached the white gate leading to the paddock where Rupert was standing under an apple-tree, and so back to the circular pond where gold fish rippled the surface in their vague perambulations. From the library window Blinkhorn, in intervals of clearing away Mr Pennington's cup, was able, should he desire it (which he emphatically did) to watch the advance and the retreat, the ebb and flow of the Penningtons, to note how vibrant was Lady Pennington's figure with some unknown emotion, and how Mr Pennington's drooping shoulders inclined towards her in evident sympathy and good counsel. Backwards and forwards on the smooth green grass, first moving majestically towards Rupert, who was eaten up with curiosity, then swinging round to stand for a moment by the pond where an immense reflected Lady Pennington in a voluminous black skirt and wide garden hat caused profound disquiet amongst the gold fish.

Mr Richard Pennington was in his element. He was exercising just those remarkable gifts which can persuade hectic persons whether they be Foreign Powers or unsettled cooks to resume their normal activities. Sir Peter, being a lawyer, had offered counsel and was satisfied that he had performed his duty. Richard Pennington being both an official and a man of the world went deeper. He added consolation. Moreover, he was an indefatigable listener and when occasion offered and the hour struck, exercised a particularly

helpful and appealing method by which he warmly commended and supported the course of action which he stated (but he might be mistaken) was proposed, and to relieve any very natural perplexity on the part of some infuriated person with no plan of campaign beyond personal violence or strong language, hastened to inquire with many phrases of a congratulatory nature whether he had the hang of it or not. It may be said at once that Richard Pennington was greatly respected as a man of sound judgment and capable of appreciating delicate situations.

'There,' said Lady Pennington, 'I've lost my notes.'

Richard Pennington concealed a timely relief with the customary gestures of sympathy and distress.

'Never mind, Richard—whatever notes I made are so stamped on my mind that sooner or later they must turn up. I find it difficult to begin. Peter used to say —what was it again——' Richard Pennington schooled his expression to alert anticipation—'Never mind—what he meant was that I saw every side of a question at once and sometimes missed the essentials. Pick out the essentials, Richard. I must just talk. I cannot help it. And yet . . . ever since I heard of your impending return,' said Lady Pennington, abandoning with her customary agility a sentence in its infancy, 'I have come to regard you as my Mister—Wells, you know—that book every one spoke about some years ago. Our vicar preached upon it. And then Wells undid all the good and the vicar——'

'Mr Britling,' assisted Mr Pennington.

'Of course. I want you to be my Mr Britling——'

Richard Pennington was overtaken by a sense of doom. He had admired but never envied his brother Peter. He did not feel equal to playing Mr Britling, and stared at the gold fish with uneasiness.

'Now that the War is over we must take up a definite

stand. It simply cannot go on. *I* cannot go on,' suddenly emphasised Lady Pennington, very large and helpless.

'My dear Mary—I'm sorry. I was so relieved to see you in these charming surroundings. I am indeed distressed——'

'The whole question is very personal,' resumed Lady Pennington, 'delicate and national. In speaking I am consoled by the fact that I speak as a mother—for mothers. If I wrote a book it would echo the secret thoughts of every thoughtful matron in the Empire. Long ago I regarded the signing of the Armistice as the death blow to the woman of fifty. This, of course, is confidential.'

Mr Pennington lowered his head without comment.

'All over the country daughters demobilised without a thought by this iniquitous Government are uprooting unsuspecting homes. How can a respectable middle-aged woman compete with a girl who has been a canteen cook, a V.A.D., driver for the War Office, and land girl. Before the War Pandora was difficult, but amenable. She could be guided. She was innocent of the mysteries of life. But to-day! For six months Pandora *bred pigs*. What would Peter have said? Perhaps it is better he is gone. I think, in any case, it would have hastened the end.'

'I did not grasp,' said Mr Pennington, not unmoved himself, 'that Pandora had taken so—so active and, well, intimate a part. Of course, in a crisis such as we have passed through one must recognise the fine spirit of the younger generation——'

'I was the first to encourage Pandora to take some active interest. I regarded her tendencies as too literary and dependent upon me. I prayed daily that she might receive strength to do her share. My prayer has been more than answered. I speak, I hope, with reverence

when I say that sometimes when I am alone I feel I have given birth not to Pandora but to a national movement.'

'I begin to understand,' said Mr Pennington, now completely baffled.

'I knew it,' murmured Lady Pennington, clasping her hands in gratitude, 'and now what is your plan of campaign? Or must you work alone?'

Mr Pennington deliberated in silence. He had a growing intuition that a crisis in the Government would certainly recall him to town in the morning.

'Pandora, then,' he said, 'has returned from her war activities somewhat overbearing and officious. The routine and training have taken the edge off her customary disposition and affection——'

'Quite—quite wrong, Richard. The War has not changed Pandora. It has only developed ten other Pandoras. The devils, you know, in the Bible. Pandora is devoted to me. She has given up all her recent work for me. She has made me lease this house, buy this horrible furniture, breed ducks. She found Blinkhorn in some out-of-the-way depot in France and managed to have him demobilised as a pivotal man. Blinkhorn *pivotal*. Pandora *lives* for me. Every time I say good-night to the girl I know she is wondering if I'll sleep. I declare I feel disloyal to her father whenever I snatch a wink——'

'I understand,' again repeated Mr Pennington heavily.

'Before the War I knew where I was,' hurried on Lady Pennington with deepening mental bewilderment. 'I wrote a little, and I—well, as I say, I knew where I was. But now! Pandora is struggling to get back to me, to shield me, and to do things. With Blinkhorn. But run after them I won't. I may be an ancient Druid but I'll stick to my woad.'

Mr Pennington faced so unexpectedly with this vision of his sister-in-law, fell into a wretched silence and ceased to live up to the high calling of the Penningtons.

'I am a pre-war woman,' admitted Lady Pennington, 'therefore a drone. Many mothers will be told so to their faces. I am spared that. Pandora hushes it up. She smoothes things over . . . That biography of her father. I was making good headway until Pandora returned. It was a picture of the period preceding the War. There is something in the way Pandora is helpful, which has soured the book. She, who was in the retreat from Serbia, remembers what the Archdeacon said when he refused a muffin at tea. Quite gravely. Pandora never laughs. But the walls shriek with laughter.'

Mr Pennington moistened his lips. He realised with the natural alarm of a Pennington that his sister-in-law was becoming hysterical.

'At the same time——' he remarked, searching the darkness for a sterling truth.

'One suffers for the War,' said Lady Pennington, muting her voice, 'one must and ought to suffer. Perhaps it is the will of Providence that Pandora and I should seek the best in each other . . .'

'At the same time——' remarked Mr Pennington.

'But one thing is surely certain. Providence never ordained that I should seek the best in Blinkhorn.'

'Blinkhorn?' he echoed, in the pleasant conversational tone of a mental specialist.

'Before the War,' replied Lady Pennington, with a touch of melancholy, 'Blinkhorn was a butler. Peter and I were accustomed to him. He was lowering and he had views; but he was a servant. He has returned a human document. Of the War. Of course one dare not complain. But I cannot forget how the Crimea ruined my father's garden.'

'Dear me,' brooded Richard Pennington, to whom this

aspect of hostilities opened out an immense field of speculation.

'But he was outside. We rarely entered the garden after '55. Blinkhorn is at one's elbow. He corners one. He took me through the Somme only yesterday on the front door steps. And Pandora backs him up. Prompts him. I tell you, Richard, we cannot eat our meals in comfort while Blinkhorn is in the room. Only last week I ventured to remark upon the soup——'

'The soup—dear me——'

'Pandora nudged me. She said, "How can you, mother"—and Blinkhorn looked very hurt and put out, and said the last time he had served pea soup a bullet had smashed the plate and hit the colonel—the soup, I mean. One cannot forget Blinkhorn answered the call, and I want to be grateful. I prayed for him for years. And yet, when the vicar was telling me the other day about all this terrible trouble in Shooters Green over the memorial, and how the Nonconformist minister has split the village into Crossites and Cenotaphs, I said to myself, "So long as I have Blinkhorn, he is all the Cenotaph I need."'

'I must say I think it rather a privilege to hear stories at first hand——' broke in Mr Pennington, a little horrified by this brutal reflection on a veteran.

'Blinkhorn moralises—he does not tell his tale and be done with it. The most ordinary remark reminds him of something at the front. And I dare not interrupt. Pandora has told me—sweetly, of course—that we owe everything to Blinkhorn. But only the other day I was on the telephone to Hastings. I wanted a melon. I said over my shoulder to Blinkhorn, "Is ten shillings too much?" He answered "This day two years ago, your ladyship, I was sucking the 'eart out of a twopenny melon on the Italian front." That's what the War has done for him.'

Mr Pennington was not unimpressed by the incident. He would never have permitted himself to adopt a definite attitude on that or any matter, but he had his strictly private and confidential opinion.

'You feel, in short, as all we elders do, a little overwhelmed by the tremendous backwash of the War. By the absorption of millions of young men and women accustomed to an open-air and—er—in fact—eventful existence. Readjustment. It is the same in America. I am on the point of placing in print a few quite unimportant observations on the subject of the absorptive capacity of the British Empire. I, in fact——'

To Lady Pennington, deeply interested in the absorptive capacity of her domestic circle, the subject was only mildly stimulating. And so, with a little forlorn sigh, Richard Pennington returned with quiet heroism to land. He, as a listener of iron nerve, so rarely had an innings. Like all silent men he harboured against a friendly tide the verbosity, the garrulity, the vain, the futile, and the indiscreet harbourage of years.

He mused in silence. 'As Pandora's uncle,' he said at last, 'I have the right to speak to her.'

'Not harshly, Richard. She is very sensitive.'

'My dear Mary—of course not. I feel convinced all Pandora requires is a little direction.'

'Some outlet,' said Lady Pennington. 'Pandora is so terribly interested in things. Now I was wondering—just an idea you know, whether it is not Pandora's duty to take some share in this reconstruction. There is so much talk at present, is there not?'

'There is,' agreed Mr Pennington, without satire.

'I must not be selfish,' said Lady Pennington firmly. 'If Pandora has work to do she must not be tied here. We must make it easy for her to leave.'

'To leave?'

'There is a rumour,' hurried on Lady Pennington,

'that a new Ministry is to be established, and I hear Andrew Whisperley is spoken of for an important post. You know Andrew, of course, a kind of connection of mine.'

'Old Whispers,' murmured Mr Pennington, with the genial levity of one official for another.

'Andrew Whisperley is coming this evening. It occurred to me perhaps you could touch on the subject —*quite casually*.'

Mr Pennington began to see the dawn.

'Pandora was so highly spoken of when she acted as Sir Bruce Tenterden's private secretary. I hear she was quite wonderful.'

Mr Pennington permitted himself a faint smile. Tenterden's K.B.E. and consequent resignation had eased a certain department of an inevitable candour.

'Andrew would do anything in reason for you,' encouraged Lady Pennington, 'and Pandora would be so happy in London. I could be always running up and down, and she would, of course, be in such good hands.'

'I wish that I——' put in Richard Pennington, overtaken by a dreadful idea.

'It gave me sleepless nights fretting over the idea of Pandora, poor child, alone in London—not, of course, that she hasn't been at work there before. But that was before we came here. And suddenly I saw it all quite clearly. Like a flash of light or answer to prayer.'

'I am on tenterhooks,' said Mr Pennington, outwardly smilingly, but inwardly cold with dismay.

'*Blinkhorn*.'

Mr Pennington relaxed and regarded his sister-in-law with the profound admiration of a high official who recognises in another sphere the refined manœuvring of his own calling.

And Lady Pennington hushed a sigh of thankfulness. How reasonable Richard was, how sympathetic.

Don't laugh at the ridiculous little plans of an old woman,' she said.

'Laugh——' echoed Mr Pennington, and halted. Ought he to explain he could not possibly . . . as an old bachelor . . .

'So that is all arranged, and you will have a nice little chat with Pandora.' Assure her my sole idea in life is to see her happy and—and occupied. Andrew will raise no objection. This new Ministry promises to be enormous. They speak of taking—but that is a secret, and I've forgotten the name, anyway.'

'But——' broke in Mr Pennington. It was a decisive moment.

'Good gracious! I quite forgot that young man Pandora has asked—a Mister Fullerton—is coming for the night. He must have been here for an hour. I must fly.'

She made a vast gesture of flight and turned.

'How is it,' she said, 'you always find a way, dear Richard?'

CHAPTER IV

I

In all the stages of human history and civilisation a class, whether of potentates or priests, has been set apart and weighed heavily on the background of men's thoughts. To crush or spare, to stand it may be aloof and sinister or merely mysterious, this pleasant superiority carries with it—so observant if tiring persons remark—its inevitable insignia.

Andrew Whisperley was a small man—about five foot four—but so long as he was seated, and his short legs with their enormous boots were concealed, his large head and heavy spectacled eyes maintained the august magnitude of his calling. His hair was thick and unparted. His face was long and sallow, with a thin, keen nose and a tight small mouth hidden beneath a reckless tawny moustache. Beneath his chin, which he rasped and scraped at fine and intrepid angles with that infectious complaint the safety razor, was a collar with spacious wings and a large black bow tie which Andrew Whisperley quite unquestionably tied himself at great speed, and, spiteful persons hinted, at the same time as his boots. As he could purchase his kind of collar in only one shop, and that at considerable expenditure of time, it must be admitted, however lingeringly, that he was not without frailty. All these things were, however, as nothing to Andrew Whisperley's eyes. They were pale sea blue, and behind his formidable horn spectacles they stared upon a reckless world with austere and frosty

knowledge and autocracy. In abject and confidential interviews in his private room, at large and critical conferences, the eyes of Mr Whisperley shone forth quiet rays of unblinking challenge and ultimate refusal. It was not required of Andrew Whisperley to speak, or display the pleasing gifts of lesser men. No adroitness of argument, no sudden flush of rhetoric, was either proper or necessary to his lonely sphere. What strange malignant power then did Andrew Whisperley, in his almost commonplace person, represent and wield? By what jurisdiction could he reduce tall and overbearing heads of departments to cringing and miserable suppliants? What two words ring like melancholy bells in the ears of all civil servants, whether they be permanent, or the tenacious, the fecund, and unbroken army of temporary officials? TREASURY SANCTION.

Andrew Whisperley was in the Treasury. . . .

It is only in a time when all privacy and reverence are scorned that it is possible, if rather indecent, to touch upon Andrew Whisperley's life outside the Treasury. Here again nothing could be easier or more acceptable to popular opinion than to ridicule his private routine. To follow him from his suburban breakfast-table (leaving in a desperate hurry at 10 a.m.), to sit with him in the tube, to watch him at his letters, and to accompany him to lunch at his club at 1 p.m., sauntering back with him at 3 p.m., for his Whitehall tea at 4. That would finish his official day in a howl of merriment.

However dangerous the statement may be it must be admitted with reluctance that Mr Whisperley, like a number of other civil servants, *did not take tea.* As a colossal stroke of satire it must be added that he had not time. He arrived at the Treasury at nine, and he left between seven and eight. His lunch he sometimes brought with him in his black despatch case, sometimes omitted to take, and upon occasions devoured in great

solitude at his club in St James's Street, where men nudged one another and said, 'D'you know Whisperley over there? No, the fellow by himself. HE'S IN THE TREASURY.' Both men would then resume eating in a masked and ruminating silence.

Mr Whisperley, having left the office, would hurry down Whitehall clutching a despatch bag stuffed with files and mounting a bus drive out to Hampstead, where he had rooms in a house in proximity to the High Street. He had been there ever since the first year of the War, and Mrs Rawlins, who had lost her husband by means of a prolonged and absorbing illness, had come to the conclusion, with a natural reluctance, that Mr Whisperley was apart from life or death and that there was something about his 'look' which made her feel queer. Andrew Whisperley, having eaten or not as the case might be (and the alternative left him calm), would thrust his short stubby fingers into his case, drag out a bundle of files, pull up his chair, light a large and neglected pipe, and so remain aloof from yelling newsboys, from victories or defeats, ration books or air raids, strikes or peace celebrations, year in and year out dependent only on his lease of life, his lamp, his pen, and his despatch case marked G.R.

It was therefore to be anticipated that Andrew Whisperley, being marooned in his bedroom at Shooters Hurst with an hour before dinner should, after a long and indifferent scrutiny of the front lawn, turn impatiently from the window and unlock his despatch case. The charming little antique writing-bureau he ignored very properly by the simple expedient of placing the mirror, laced toilet covers, candlesticks, and other articles upon the carpet, and was soon comfortably seated and studying with deliberation a few reminders upon a full page minute sheet. Then, unscrewing his pen, he compressed his horn spectacles against his bushy

eyebrows, clung to his moustache with his left hand and wrote :—

'*Establishment.*

'With reference to your minute of 14.9.19, I have interviewed Miss Jeffries, Mrs Lawson, and Miss Symes, and I regret to inform you that none of these lady clerks appear to me to possess the necessary experience and qualifications for the post of confidential secretary. At the same time the matter is so urgent that no time must be lost, and if I am unsuccessful in hearing of a suitable applicant during the next few days I will reconsider Mrs Lawson.'

Mr Whisperley cast the file from him just as though he expected the messenger to enter the room and remove it, and snatching up another wrote with perfect serenity and good humour a draft letter for the typist, 'I am directed to acknowledge your letter of 10.6.19, and to inform you that after careful consideration it is regretted . . .'

Long after, it suddenly occurred to him that he had better make his brief preparations for dinner.

II

In the room next to Andrew Whisperley, James Fullerton, perceiving through the window the promenade of the Penningtons, their grave countenance, their despairing and emphatic gestures, was overtaken by the preposterous notion that they were talking about himself. He was aware that Lady Pennington had not insisted upon his coming, had indeed taken no active part in the invitation. He was a modest man and he agreed with her. He was certain her attitude was the one he would have adopted himself. Half the bitterness in such affairs

of life is simply because the future son-in-law has a profound, if down-trodden, conviction of his mother-in-law's superior knowledge and amazing intuitions regarding himself.

'Mind you,' said James, as the Penningtons swung shoulder to shoulder round the sundial and advanced, 'mind you, there is a lot to be said for the woman. The things she is pouring out about me may be half-truths, but they must impress the old boy. After all, what is one? A recently demobilised major. There must be thousands of recently demobilised majors. The earth is crawling with majors. In my interview with her—or will she delegate the old fellow?—I shall point rather to the future than the past. I shall say I—well, I shall simply point with quiet persistence into the future. We will stand, the elderly Penningtons and I, looking with steady blazing eyes into the sunset—sunrise, I should say. We will not speak—the moment is not one for idle words. As a cartoon by Partridge, I have not a doubt the scene would move the Empire very deeply. But will it move the Penningtons . . .?'

James lit a cigarette. He slowly extracted a small leather book from his bag, and seating himself, glanced at a page or two here and there. It was not a diary, nor a petty account book, nor the Pelman Course. It was none of these things. It was a book of little reflections, written for the most part in a note of pensive inquiry. Books by stout and prosperous writers, containing wistful and beautiful thoughts, are frequently published. These do well. It was not of these. It was a little book to fly to in moments of irritation or depression and simply write within a handful of brief, javelin sentences, the things one felt about a person. It was possible to do so in trains, in sitting-rooms, in church, in the theatre. It eased. It relieved. Sometimes it even exalted and sought to be shared.

And sitting there, demobilised and out of war, James reflected about this conference of the Penningtons, and was shocked at the futility of it, and the splendid perversity of love, and unscrewed his fountain pen to write at the top 'An Autumn Garden,' when there came a familiar tap at the door.

He paused. As sleepers are said to dream within two seconds that the house has been burglared, the cook murdered, and themselves on the point of execution, so James, at that tapping, remembered Blinkhorn in a score of varied pursuits and places, but always Blinkhorn, and always invincibly tedious and lowering. And he recalled that during the year Blinkhorn had been his batman he had reflected in his little book of consolation how enviable must be the existence of a butler who can talk continuously and with profundity, upstairs and down, of the ideals, the hopes, the disappointments, and the passing pageantry of life. And yet how wise of him simply to hush his mind on paper. Who would have thought that one day Blinkhorn, no longer compressed into khaki, would occupy the centre of his stage? *For Blinkhorn knew . . .*

'Come in,' shouted James.

The butler entered, closed the door, and laid down a tray of tea.

'I did not come down,' ventured James, 'as I thought Mr Pennington might wish to speak to Lady Pennington. By the way, what is Mr Pennington?'

'Mr Pennington, sir, is a very clever gentleman in Government matters. They say he will go far. A quiet gentleman, but knowing. In no disrespectful sense—*knowing*.'

'He is unmarried?' asked James quite vaguely.

'He is, sir, and will, in my opinion, remain so. It is rumoured, sir, one cannot be deaf to everything, that Mr Pennington has his own views on marriage.'

'Eh?'

'I have heard, sir, that he would not marry himself because he had not five hundred a year. Seems a pity. Looking back . . . For myself,' reflected Blinkhorn, 'for myself, I never married when I should, and I shouldn't when I could——'

('This,' breathed James desperately, 'is going to be "The Butler's Story." ')

'I was admiring the garden,' he said loudly.

Blinkhorn was not one to be hustled. With him all roads led to Mrs Blinkhorn.

'It is remarkable,' he replied, and added ominously, 'considering of everything.'

'I suppose Miss Pennington takes an interest,' ventured James.

'Miss Pandora,' remarked Blinkhorn, running his fingers down the interior of a silk sock. 'Miss Pandora is a young lady full of notions—she sees things in the hair. If only her ladyship was more in sympathy and *younger* all round. Mothers, sir, take 'ardly to grown-up girls. And Miss Pandora funnily enough don't realise she is grown-up. *Marriageable.* Never seems to think of it. Full of dreams and fancies, sir. Like a pantomime.'

James cast a scared look at his ally and drank half a cup of tea in an unbroken silence.

'I call to mind,' remarked the butler, picking a speck of cotton off the shoulder of the Fullerton dress coat, 'that Mrs Blinkhorn was not dissimilar.'

'Ah,' said James.

'In her station, of course, sir—in her station. Used to water pansies after supper. Never minded bats. Always by herself. Curious young woman that way. But she grew out of it, sir. The last time I saw that woman—ten years ago come Christmas Day—she had changed all that, sir, and so will Miss Pandora,—*once she's settled.*'

'Settled,' echoed James with horror. 'D'you mean she's—she's——?'

'Getting married, sir? No, sir, not as I'm aware of. But she might. They do. Especially if they're not altogether 'appy at 'ome. I am the last to speak against my employer, sir, and I have served Sir Peter and Lady Pennington for fifteen years off and on, but the master's death made a difference. Lady Pennington is changed, sir. She is difficult. The poor lady is a little short sometimes. Bereavement, sir.'

'The War, of course.'

'No, sir. Lady Pennington took the War very well considerin'. I have felt it my duty to posterity and due to you, sir, to remind her ladyship of it from time to time.'

'How do I come in? Surely you don't talk about me.'

'Only a word in season, sir. Her ladyship has a little habit of gettin' her own back at table, visitors being present. Many ladies 'ave. It's their way. Tactics, in fact. The other day she refers to you, and Miss Pandora spoke up.'

'Did she, now? But you shouldn't repeat this sort of thing. I don't think I——'

'Her ladyship remarks over the fish that it is a national disgrace officers can't afford to marry.'

'Did she?' remarked James, rather braced.

'That's her ladyship's little way of breakin' things, sir,' the butler hastened to explain, 'and Miss Pandora she said——'

'Well?'

'That, after all, you were very young.'

'I suppose she meant well,' mused James, 'but as I'm thirty, and look more, I don't quite understand the line of argument.' Then aloud, 'Miss Pennington's not so thunderingly old herself.'

'No, sir, the young lady is just twenty-one. But she

has seen so much. Canteens, land work, flag days, Government office. Few of us have had such opportunities.'

'No,' admitted James, awed despite himself.

'Curious how age counts,' resumed the latter, for whose services bells were now clanging from every part of the house, 'especially with young ladies. Mr Richard Pennington now. What a well-preserved, quiet-spoken gentleman. Distinguished appearance too. Like a sound vintage port, sir. Then there is Mr Whisperley—strange gentleman to look at. Very neglected. But I'd like to see any one take a liberty just because he's in a Government office. Even the vicar, sir, has a way with Miss Pandora. It may be desperation, sir, but it's an attack in mass. You'd think, lookin' at the vicar with his baldness and his trouble with his teeth at table that he'd be speechless. Far from it. Take Colonel Streeten I was speaking about to Mr Pennington. Strange old gentleman. Very famous. Household word. Ladies would jump at 'im. Even now.'

'Colonel Streeten?'

'The Kaffir Kloof survivor.'

'I seem to remember. Yes, in our nursery we had a picture—what a picture—a huge man with a black beard and a Union Jack pushed into the top of his breeches.'

'No, sir—unless he has fallen away. He is, of course, very old——'

'Never mind, and so Mr Pennington was interested. I would have said—well, all right——'

'Interested, sir—he went white and his glasses fell upon the hearthrug. He said it brought it all back. He went up to tell Mr Whisperley, and I think, sir, I hear them going downstairs now. Excuse me, sir.'

'In that case,' said James, 'I'd better follow. The

sight of two permanent officials manifesting emotion should not be missed.'

III

Richard Pennington was alone in the library when James came in. But he glanced up quickly. He was evidently on tenterhooks to have a word with some one —probably Whisperley.

'A cold night,' he said, adopting a kind of *entente* between a college tutor and an under-secretary. It was quite evident he would prefer to continue his paper. But James saw his way. He would make an impression —he *must* make an impression upon this suave and distant personage. It is, however, an arduous business to open conversation with elderly officials. They not merely do not respond. They become moribund. James knew he must speak or withdraw a broken man. He turned over all the cold nights he could remember. Much as he disliked personal reminiscences he recalled a splendid one. It was, of course, ridiculous of him to imagine Mr Pennington would tolerate the War.

'There was a night on the Somme,' he began hopefully, and paused. Mr Pennington had raised his head about an inch. He said nothing. 'On the Somme,' repeated James, and was surprised to see Mr Pennington start away and hurry into the hall. Was he ill? No, he had merely a wild, deathless hope that Andrew Whisperley was near.

'Excuse me,' he said, returning, 'you were saying something——'

'It was nothing,' remarked James, 'nothing at all.'

'Ah, here is Whisperley,' cried Mr Pennington, much relieved. 'You don't know each other, eh?—Whisperley, this is Mr—dear me—how stupid.'

'Fullerton,' said James. 'How d'you do?'

Andrew Whisperley nodded. He gave James a look of contempt and ferocity.

'That night on the Somme,' resumed James, determined to break down this barrage of middle age.

'The Somme,' queried Andrew Whisperley, 'didn't we mess that up? Or was it somewhere else. I never read the papers.'

'I picked up a book when I was in America,' said Mr Pennington in his cool, inflexible accents, 'it was about the work of the United States Mule Corps. Most amusing. What devilish animals—quite devilish. There was an anecdote about one.'

'We had mules too,' said James.

'Oh,' said Mr Pennington, with symptoms of deepening fatigue. 'Where, now?'

'On the Somme,' said James, blushing heavily.

Andrew Whisperley sickened of this. He was not accustomed to drivelling about the War. He had never done so, and he had no intention of commencing. He did wish people would drop the War. And he spoke without warning at nobody in particular, but apparently for Mr Pennington's benefit about matters affecting the Treasury and the new Ministry. During these harsh and menacing comments, Mr Pennington, being an official of long familiarity with expressions of opinion, automatically ceased to listen. He simply stood, his fine head lowered as though impressed, but critical, and mused upon many odd and varied topics. Whether there would be decent port after dinner, and who was coming.

'This Humbleford,' snarled Andrew Whisperley suddenly, 'who's he? Another great discovery, I suppose. Another business man to show us how to run our show.'

'Who did you say?' asked James, suddenly alert.

For a moment Andrew Whisperley glared at him.

'John Humbleford,' he replied at last, and addressing the extreme edge of the bookcase.

'This,' remarked Mr Pennington, with perfect courtesy and quiet decision, 'will hardly interest Mr—Mr?—dear me——'

'I would like a conference with you later,' said Andrew Whisperley pointedly.

'By all means,' rejoined Mr Pennington gravely.

And still James remained. He hungered to see the beacons lit, to watch flames leap up out of the old dead wood. The clock struck the half-hour, and Mr Pennington could wait no longer.

'Who d'you think is coming to-night?' he asked, taking no further notice of James.

Mr Whisperley looked black and shook his head.

'Colonel Streeten.'

Mechanical and emotional changes swept over Andrew Whisperley. His eyes quickened, his mouth relaxed, his back bent, and the stud in the middle of his shirt disappeared with a faint pop.

'Not of Kaffir's Kloof?'

'The same.'

'But, my dear fellow, he must be dead.'

'I assure you——'

'Well, I take your word, but surely it's—it's—well, I was a boy at the time.'

'I know,' laughed Mr Pennington delightedly, 'I was at Oxford.'

'Well, I'm damned,' came from Andrew Whisperley, who only swore on very great occasions.

'I can recall it all as vividly as yesterday,' pursued Mr Pennington, now strongly worked up.

'That stand of his against the—the——'

'Basutos.'

'Matabele, I think.'

'No, Zulu,' this firmly.

Both officials breathed more quickly. This was a national question which must be in order.

'A reference book,' said Andrew Whisperley, distantly.

'Here,' said James, 'is *Who's Who*,' and began to turn up S. The two officials fell into a massive and dangerous silence awaiting the decision. 'Curiously enough,' remarked James, who had not surrendered Mr Pennington altogether, 'curiously enough, I have an old relative who has actually maintained off her own bat a whole race of savages. I wonder if they are the same lot. Possibly this Colonel Streeten knows her. I must ask him.'

The two officials expressed no curiosity whatever.

'She is my grandmother,' added James, but without hope.

'Well,' asked Andrew Whisperley brusquely, 'was it Matabele or Zulu?'

Mr Pennington poised.

'Both,' replied James, with a charming smile to the competitors, 'and some others as well.'

The crisis was past.

'I was at Oxford at the time,' resumed Mr Pennington tenderly. 'I shall never forget the amazing excitement when the great news came. Streeten of Kaffir's Kloof. Dear me, I *wish* I had known. I would have brought General Pooler-Pye of the American Army. He would have travelled a continent to meet Streeten.'

'My grandmother——' remarked James, smiling at what happened to the first missionary.

'He was scouting towards the Zambesi——'

'The Matoppo, I think.'

'He was led into an ambush,' pursued Andrew Whisperley. 'There were six of them. For days they did not know they were surrounded. Amazing fortitude. Terrific sense of duty. Their stand will go down in history. The Empire was fired, Pennington—you remember.'

'Remember,' echoed Mr Pennington, turning aside,

'when my father—a hard-headed banker, read how Colonel Streeten galloped three hundred miles with a kitten in his hat, he broke down. It was the first and last time,' concluded Mr Pennington slowly, 'I ever saw my father cry.'

'Those,' said Andrew Whisperley, with melancholy satisfaction, 'are days which will never return.'

Overtaken by the shame of the present, James slipped with ignominy from the room.

'But when I'm fifty,' he breathed into the desolation of the hall, 'just you wait until I'm fifty.'

CHAPTER V

I

THE first to arrive were the Pinyons. They encountered James in the hall and lingered a moment before the admirable log fire. James approved of Pinyon. He considered him the right kind of vicar. Usually the clergy treated him with polite indifference until his name—that terrible name—smashed into their inner consciousness. How well he had come to recognise those early symptoms. That far-away look. That earnest questioning gaze. How often he had leaped into the crowd before the Bishop returned to earth. But Pinyon—that excellent fellow—did not recoil. His pulse remained normal. With a thrill James repeated the name. Greatly daring he said some of his people had been in the Church. The profile of Mr Pinyon was unshaken. A little piqued, James remarked that he had even possessed a Bishop.

'I once met a Pullerton,' contributed that altogether superlative fellow, 'but Fullerton—no——'

'Never heard of him?' shouted James. 'Don't say he's going under.'

The vicar was not unmoved. He was even a trifle puzzled. But he shook his head.

'If I were a millionaire,' mused James in a glow, 'I'd build this dear chap a cathedral of his own.'

But the vicar never knew of that gracious thought. He was anxious to speak about Reconstruction.

The War had made a difference to Mr Pinyon. It had,

being no respecter of persons and an anarchist in middle-aged homes, snatched up the vicar, who was jogging along very amicably with Mrs Pinyon, and despatched him as a chaplain to France. The awakening of Mr Pinyon to all kinds of things, some rudimentary, others a little saddening to one of his calling, was still in operation. Mr Pinyon was in a state of mental electricity. He was on wires about it all. He returned to Mrs Pinyon in the expectation of carrying her away, of thrusting her by sheer force into his exalted state of mind. But Mrs Pinyon, like Lady Pennington and a host of other ladies, was static. She was proud of Edgar. He had learned new tricks, but a dog with sugar perpetually on his nose grows irksome, and even dying for the king is tedious after a while. On the whole she was glad Edgar was out of uniform and back at his work (she had never regarded his activities in places without an address as anything but giving the troops a good example of what Christianity ought to mean). To her increasing dismay and perplexity Edgar had accepted the Armistice without relaxation. He had become a prey to strange habits, running up to town to lunch with more or less public persons, visiting publishers, delivering lectures. Little lectures accompanied by lantern slides apparently operated on the sterling principle of 'better late than never,' slides of the front line purchased near Covent Garden, and reproduced from drawings in the illustrated papers by artistic gentlemen busied in Fleet Street. The vicar, holding a pointer and wearing a tin hat, was doubtless a serious contribution to the progress of social problems in village life, but Mrs Pinyon did not care about it. She admitted the War—though she thought it a pity, all things considered—she had accepted Edgar's perambulations over the Channel, but she felt in his position and at his age, there was a time to put away—well, settle down.

Mr Pinyon was short, clumsily built, with a large bald head, ruddy clean-shaven face, and restless light blue eyes. He was on the whole hearty in manner, a habit accentuated by the trenches, with disturbing relapses into a smiling deprecation, an inheritance of many years pastoral work. It was the manly note Mrs Pinyon detested.

Mr Pinyon had entered the house in a neutral spirit. He was neither vicar nor chaplain, and he was, being one who enjoyed the fullness of life, distracted a little by a most promising smell of cooking. (How many can afford to curl the lip at Mr Pinyon?) He had also sacred memories of a sound port. (Who again?)

'Shall we stroll outside?' suggested James.

Down the grass walk, where several hours earlier the Penningtons had marched, he conducted Mr Pinyon, who lost no time in placing his stout arm to the pump.

'You know Sussex, of course?'

'No, hardly at all.'

'The Penningtons are dear people, are they not?'

'Charming—charming.'

'Not relatives?'

'No. In fact, I really know Miss Pennington. Met her in France.'

'Curiously enough I never ran across Miss Pennington over there,' said Mr Pinyon dreamily, and just as though the British Army had shared the same motor bus. 'I have only known her since they came here. But I regard her as a friend. I have a great admiration for her. There is something about her that I cannot put into words. Her sympathy, her intuition are evident, but one does not look in a girl so young for real creative thought. *Intellect. Imagination.*' Those two words Mr Pinyon emphasised with two sharp pats of his hand on James's arm and looked searchingly at him. 'You know what I mean,' he said, after a pause.

'Quite!' supported James hastily, 'though I always looked on Miss Pennington as rather shy and reserved.'

Immediately Mr Pinyon, who had suffered a good deal at the hands of his wife in the trap coming up, and was also notoriously a creature of buoyant confidences, led James (a comrade-in-arms, you understand) away from the goldfish.

'The War,' he remarked, with extraordinary gravity, 'has made a difference. It has made a difference to you, and to me, and Miss Pennington. On the other hand, there are those in whom it has not produced the same remarkable change. I mention no names. Miss Pennington is a firebrand, a revolutionary, and a thinker.'

'Good lord!' groaned James. 'A Bolshevik!'

'I speak strongly,' pursued the vicar, glooming ominously towards the unconscious village of Shooters Green. 'But there are times when one must make a stand. I was not prepared to do so until Miss Pennington came. She found me demobilised and faced by the inertia of this parish. To cut a long story short, Miss Pennington has set the place by the ears. Organisation. Ideas. Push. Church services well attended. Blow to dissent.'

'I had no idea——' remarked James, genuinely surprised by activities so appropriate to Mr Pinyon himself.

'Of course not,' cried the vicar, 'who would? That is the girl all over. Do my wife, or even Lady Pennington, know the real Miss Pennington? They may think they do. My wife says most emphatically she *does*.'

'What,' asked James, with a rally of hope, 'does Mrs Pinyon say?'

'That she is a designing minx——'

'Designing? Oh, I say!'

'And would be the better of being married.'

After Blinkhorn that was the second time of asking.

The gong sounded and resounded, and Lady

Pennington's deep voice was audible from the open French window calling vaguely into the twilight.

'Dinner,' said the vicar warmly. 'Not a word of this.'

'Not a word,' echoed James, in a daze.

'The ridiculous thing is this,' whispered Mr Pinyon excitedly in his ear, 'I believe I'm the only man who really understands Pandora.' And as a clincher, '*She told me so.*'

II

That they were all waiting for something to happen was, of course, too obvious for comment. Outside, in the hall, panelled and soft with the light of lamps, the white shirt of Blinkhorn was stationary, expectant. Within, where they all stood, there was an air of tension. In the attitude of Richard Pennington, drooping faintly derisive over Mrs Pinyon, there was a note of controlled apprehension. James Fullerton, glancing quickly about, was aware of Andrew Whisperley, a remote figure fiercely spectacled and restless, attired in the kind of evening clothes which are perhaps the greatest tribute to the unconquerable freedom of the human soul. He stood alone, facing the door, his arms crossed over a shirt already absolved of studs, his neck a deep scarlet by reason of a collar inordinately tall. Before the fireplace, staring fixedly hallwards, was Lady Pennington, for whom all pleasure in the evening was gone. She stood, a figure of domestic tragedy known to every household, her mind a pageant of soups, fishes, and meats already over-done, and in her eyes the frantic indecisions of a hostess and a woman of breeding. The vicar, advancing with apologies for an unpardonable lateness quite obviously unrecorded by any person present, wavered and came to berth behind his wife, where he remained sniffing discreetly. Then he, too, looked quickly

here and there, glanced at the clock, caught a shaft of Blinkhorn's gleaming shirt, and joined in that watchful, well-conducted vigil.

To James the moments passed interminably. He stood in the shadow of the heavy curtain, unobserved but conscious, too, of a hostile and material spirit in the room. It was not easy to lay one's hand on it. It was not simply in the consuming impatience of Lady Pennington, or the polite and superior complacency of Mrs Pinyon, who prided herself on punctuality, but in three (probably there were more) cynical revelations of the indifference of worldly things. There was the clock, so placidly and beautifully melodious, on the mantelpiece. There was before the fire, sitting upon his haunches, his yellow eyes veiled, his whiskers stiff with cynicism, Prince, the tortoiseshell cat. There was gesticulating far below Lady Pennington, unheard but undiscouraged, a minute and shrivelled little man, with a shrill nasal voice, cheeks as yellow as a long anticipated will, a yellow forehead, and a mottled scalp across the summit of which a platoon of long silver hairs had fallen beneath the assault of a wet brush, a pendulous white moustache, and in one rheumy and mournful eye a single glass wedged with a defiant note. This was Colonel Streeten, to whom the present was, and would remain for a little while longer, a useful medium, if nothing more, for performing a proper obeisance to the past.

'Yes,' Mr Pennington was saying, with a resonance, a depth, and a measured judgment which delighted Mrs Pinyon—when Blinkhorn hovered for an instant on the threshold and an alert light sprang into his drowsy eye. A swift stir like the ripple of a breeze upon a pond swept over the room. Andrew Whisperley unfolded his arms, and his shirt, untrammelled and unrestrained, swelled out like the breast of a penguin. Lady Pennington made an irresolute movement and summoned a smile with the

bravery of women. James Fullerton stood without moving in the shadow of the curtains.

And the clock, the cat, and the Colonel carried on as before.

Richard Pennington with a final, but not hurried or distrait, monosyllable abandoned Mrs Pinyon and regarded Pandora! He had an instinct this must be Pandora, and knew at once poor Lady Pennington had her faults.

The girl, of whom he had heard not a little and about whom he had pictured something ridiculously different, was standing in the doorway, composed and without any indication in her dress or eyes of haste or dismay. She was late, and she had kept them waiting, yet she seemed —to James—to linger in the doorway just as though she had been there in the twilight of the hall, observant of them all long before they saw her. And she wore—to the increased irritation of Lady Pennington—a perfectly plain black dress, without jewellery, with the exception of a curious flashing ornament in her dark, abundant hair. An Eastern scarf of gold, heavy and shimmering, draped her white shoulders, and at her heart lay a pink rose. But it was her face, lifted above the gold of her scarf and with the light of the room upon it and the twilight of the panelled hall behind, which struck them to a sudden abrupt silence. It carried in its soft brown colouring, tinged with carnation, the large blue eyes so amazingly fertile of expression, the quaint humorous mouth, unlike the lips of a girl, something of the mystery and the secret of past ages, as gipsies are said by the romantic to bear in their hearts the memories of ancient roads.

(To Richard Pennington Pandora was of middle height, but he hastened to satisfy himself that she could never look too tall or too short. She was not that kind of girl. So sure was he that he even drew a desultory

conversation with Andrew Whisperley round to the point. But Whisperley had made up his own mind that Pandora was tall. He was, you understand, only five foot four himself. James Fullerton, to whom Richard Pennington also mentioned the matter quite casually, gave it as his opinion that she was 'the right size for a woman,' and relapsed into the defensive silence of youth).

In the meantime Pandora simply stood looking at them all. Until she laughed. And at the sound of her low-pitched laughter every male there relaxed and every woman trembled with vexation.

'Well?' she said. Her voice soft, mocking, and so quiet in tone that it seemed to float above them and be lost in the observant night, awoke her mother to the fact that, during a very precious thirty seconds, they had been awaiting Pandora's pleasure.

All, that is, save the clock, the cat, and the Colonel.

'We've been waiting, Pandora, dear,' she said, and only Mrs Pinyon knew what a triumph for Christianity the 'dear' was.

'*Dearest,*' returned Pandora affectionately, and without signs of distress.

'Shall we go in?' was all her mother's response. 'Richard, kindly take Mrs Pinyon.'

It seemed at that moment to Mr Pennington, casting a haunted glance at Andrew Whisperley, that some middle-aged men were bearing the burden rather more than others. But to Andrew Whisperley, who only appeared middle-aged by reason of his abandoned shirt and disillusioned moustache, Mr Pennington and Mrs Pinyon might have appeared interesting contemporaries of Church and State. The pathos of it was that neither Whisperley nor anybody else gave the matter a moment's thought. Mr Pennington and Mrs Pinyon made their exit without applause and disappeared towards the dining-room.

Pandora, shaking hands with the vicar, turned to James. She did not offer her hand but stood before him meeting his eyes with inscrutable quiet scrutiny. To James it seemed prolonged but in actual fact it was almost momentary.

'Mr Whisperley,' broke in Lady Pennington, with a faint note of triumph, 'will you take in my daughter.'

Andrew Whisperley sprang into action. He advanced grotesquely like a prize-winner at a village sports and hooked his right arm. Pandora slowly turned her head. She regarded him for an instant with a curiously reposeful and maternal gaze. She had, ever since she stood in the doorway, hungered to do his hair and push in his dissimilar but equally reluctant studs.

Lady Pennington disposed of James without mercy.

'Mr Fullerton—Miss Macadoo.'

Miss Macadoo was one of those ladies who need no introduction. That she acted as companion to Lady Pennington affected no one. Her temperament was normal and her personality of such as to render her as it were invisible in the room. People frequently said strictly private and indiscreet things before Miss Macadoo simply because they had not seen her. Bus conductors were known to have passed her again and again and wrangled with inspectors upon the number of insides and out. Is there any household without a Macadoo in its hour of need?

James, in whom the belief in Providence was burning low, passed Blinkhorn in the dining-room door with a stony face. Behind came Lady Pennington with the vicar and Colonel Streeten as gentlemen-in-waiting, both bandying the pleasantries peculiar to the circumstance. The door closed. The vicar, schooling his expression, said grace. Blinkhorn, catching the eye of Mary, the parlourmaid, opened the ceremony.

In the library the tortoiseshell cat raised his massive

head and stared with narrowed eyes towards the hall. At the abrupt dispersion of voices on the closing of the door he stretched, yawned, and crossing the carpet on soundless feet looked out into the autumn night. Like a shadow or a memory he tarried an instant, and suddenly the shadow passed. . . .

III

Another Macadoo might have made the table even, but a dozen Macadoos couldn't have produced harmony when handled by the monumental inconsequence of Lady Pennington. All morning she had brooded and fretted over an imaginary table at which Pinyons, Whisperleys, Streetens, and the rest had played a tireless musical chairs, with Miss Macadoo popping in and popping out where things were obviously impossible. To Lady Pennington, for whom a little handbook with remarks such as, 'It is found fruitful to place an elderly geologist next to a lady interested in crochet work,' would have ranked with *Daily Light* as a source of permanent consolation and guidance, the function was like all other functions in her experience, one to be faced in a spirit of hope tempered with memories of what our military optimists so recently used to call 'dogged rearguard actions.'

Pandora had, as one might have known, been of no help whatever. Her indifference, to put it no stronger, to her own sex, removed Mrs Pinyon and Miss Macadoo altogether. She simply had no use for either. As things were, then, Lady Pennington faced her brother-in-law. On her left were Colonel Streeten, Mr Whisperley, and Pandora. On her right the vicar, Miss Macadoo, James Fullerton, and Mrs Pinyon.

She had done her best.

To Pandora, facing with her pensive, unfathomable

gaze the bleak stare of Mrs Pinyon, the steady, unmistakable regard of James, and the friendly nonentity of Miss Macadoo, the silence of the lower end of the table appeared unfelt and unresented. She was, indeed, a creature of infinite composure and tantalising remoteness from her surroundings.

It was to be expected that the Vicar would challenge Colonel Streeten. He made opening play with Sussex, a safe and fruitful subject, one would hazard, in a house of smuggler traditions. At which Lady Pennington, breathing vague unrest with the ebb and flow of a large rope of pearls upon her bosom, brightened as the sun gleams forth before it is obscured by overwhelming clouds, and said as though with finality, 'Belloc—yes—*The Four Just Men . . .*'

And instantly Richard Pennington covered the retreat by inquiring whether Mrs Pinyon had ever visited the States. Mrs Pinyon replied that she had not, and finding some difficulty with a fishbone was unable to add that they must be very interesting. Especially just now. Mr Pennington, veiling his eyes from the inevitable, stated that he had only landed on Tuesday last after a considerable period over there, and went on to touch on one or two broad topics of an introductory and stimulating nature. 'Wilson must be clever,' assisted Mrs Pinyon. Yes, Mr Pennington agreed that Mr Wilson was deservedly an outstanding figure in European affairs. He had had the coveted honour of some conversation with him. 'How nice,' said Mrs Pinyon. 'And does he talk down his nose?' this with a faint grimace. Mr Pennington, perceiving no future in this particular line of observation, shook his head smilingly and just as though he and Mrs Pinyon were sharing an excellent little jest, and proceeded (he thought it high time) to monopolise rather than attempt to direct conversation, bestowing upon Mrs Pinyon mature impressions of the political

and social future of America, a broad-minded and at times brilliant survey which, lasting as it did from the fish to the apple fritters (unhappily rather burnt) would have electrified a company of leader writers, caused profound dismay amongst financiers, and brought the Publisher's Association down by special train. During the entrée, he paused to permit Mrs Pinyon to underline any point with which she might not altogether agree or which she frankly opposed. There was, he knew, diversity of opinion amongst well-informed persons in England regarding the competitive possibilities of the Middle West. But Mrs Pinyon was apparently convinced—it might be even carried away. There was a slight perspiration on her brow—nothing more. Warming to the Labour outlook, Mr Pennington, speaking now in the clear, deliberate upper scale of a public man, and never removing his penetrating gaze from Mrs Pinyon, abandoned the skirmishing of outposts and began to get into real touch with the subject. . . .

Andrew Whisperley was a slow starter, if one can call him a candidate at all. Being faced by Miss Macadoo he had pushed her across a dish of salted almonds as a sort of recognition of amenities. Miss Macadoo, with a smile, had pointed to a dish before her. Andrew Whisperley had echoed the smile, and so, after mutual stares, he had fallen upon his fish in a kind of frenzy. He had, as it were, broken the ice and fallen in. Moved to compassion, James presumed Miss Macadoo was Scotch. (Pandora raised her eyes at that point and seemed to take an unnecessarily intelligent interest in the duologue). No, Miss Macadoo was Irish, though she added, after a pause, very many people thought she was Scotch, and she had come to the conclusion it was because of the Mac.

'Irish!' echoed James, as at a recognised source of mirth, and just as though Miss Macadoo had said 'George Robey.'

'Reciprocity,' repeated Mr Pennington. It was the word of the week.

'But I've never been there,' added Miss Macadoo, and Pandora with solemn eyes, again seemed riveted.

'I was born in Australia,' went on Miss Macadoo, pleased to be getting along so nicely.

'I have often wondered——' James remarked.

'But I left there when I was an infant,' amended Miss Macadoo.

It occurred to Andrew Whisperley about this time that he was enjoying himself uncommonly well. He was hungry and had drunk a glass or two of hock. He admired the room and was soothed and mellowed by his surroundings. After polishing his spectacles in a contented reverie, he thrust them on his nose and swung round upon Pandora.

'I wonder,' he said severely, 'how I'd like to live in the country. Like this.'

Pandora said something James did not catch, it was spoken so softly.

'But I don't,' he snapped, apparently in reply. 'I hate all that sort of thing. Simply haven't the time for it. Never had. Never will.' (This with grim satisfaction).

James, between whom and Miss Macadoo an abyss had fallen, leant forward as though to put in a word. But Andrew Whisperley, gulping off half a glass of wine and sprinkling his terrible shirt in the process, jerked out of his inner consciousness scraps of disjointed revelation. It did not occur to him, as a head of a department, that it was all strictly biographical and that he resembled a dishevelled dog barking in a kind of paroxysm round the legs of a child too panic-struck to run.

'Reading—theatres—no time—no time. Not even for the papers. For twenty years I've kept a chart. Hours of work. I do overtime on Sundays. Seventy hours a week, not counting Sundays.'

He uttered a short, harsh laugh.

'Illness? Never am ill. Indigestion, of course. Here are my pills. Quite harmless. But never in bed. No time. What would I do with myself in the country?' he asked triumphantly. '*Me!*'

('He is perfectly fascinating,' was all Pandora said to herself. Aloud, she threw him, as it were, a biscuit which Mr Whisperley as quickly pounced upon and gobbled up).

'Some people must live in the country,' she said, with the eyes of a child.

'There is no *must* about it,' he contradicted. 'Some people wish to live in the country, or can live in the country, or shouldn't live in the country, but there is no *must*. I was brought up in the country. I know.'

He reflected.

'But this,' he said, in a milder tone, 'is different . . . Strange this quiet. Up in my room I noticed it Found difficulty in concentration. Silence. Just at sunset.'

A light sprang into Pandora's slumberous eyes. As though she had heard some familiar note of music at a great distance.

'At Hampstead the windows of my room look out upon the red roofs of other houses. Chimneys. With a bit of the Heath. All I see of it. No time for walking. Hate it, anyhow. And my cat——'

'Your cat,' said Pandora quickly, 'tell me about your cat.'

He checked. He removed his spectacles and scowled.

'There's nothing to tell,' he said rudely. 'I have a cat. That's all.'

('He is wonderful,' said Pandora to herself. 'But he nearly bit me then.')

'My cat Pelleas,' she said, in her low, penetrating voice, and seemingly unaware that at its first accents a silence began to drop over the table, passing from one to the other, until only Mr Pennington beat out to sea,

and the Colonel, being deaf as well as blind to everything beyond 1890, was an interested but only fairly successful mediator between his moustache and the chocolate soufflé, 'my cat Pelleas . . .'

(About a week later James's mother remarked, 'But what in the world had she to say about her cat in the middle of dinner?' He looked at her thoughtfully before replying. 'I'm bothered if I know,' he said at last, 'but I'll never forget it. Like a scene by a great actor. You know? Something in the voice or eyes. And all the time that strange fellow Whisperley stared at her without blinking. Just those two, Whisperley and Pandora, with all the rest of us like an audience holding our breath. I cannot tell you what she said. Perhaps nothing much. But she nearly broke down, and there was Whisperley glaring at her through his spectacles and his shirt front going up and down.')

If, out of the utterly silent room, and under the glare of Andrew Whisperley's spectacles Pandora constructed, with cunning touches, Pelleas as a cat moving between the sunset and the dawn, a cat soft-footed and elusive, but infinitely wise and resourceful, a cat with queer lovable ways and little unforgettable caresses, then she played for high stakes. She had discovered, to put it brutally, the solitary chink in the Whisperley armour and she touched a supreme note when he, clearing his throat, asked a casual, even a stupid question about its age or colour or something equally futile. And when Pandora replied in her low, pensive voice that, to her, Pelleas had no age or colour, which was speaking crudely a naked truth, Andrew Whisperley was content. He apparently alone, in that silent room, understood.

It was suddenly borne in upon them that Lady Pennington had risen and was herding the ladies to the door. Rising slowly, Pandora followed them, her gold scarf clinging loosely around her white shoulders, her fingers

picking the petals of the rose at her breast, her eyes downcast. At the door the long lashes flickered up and fell again. Then the door closed, and the Colonel, by the assistance of a melon, six apples, all the Brazil nuts, and a decanter of port, told for the *n*th time the memorable defence of Kaffir's Kloof.

In the hall Lady Pennington advanced with a very proper sense of outrage.

'Really, Pandora—how can you——?'

'What, mother?'

'This nonsense—this cat.'

'*Pelleas?*'

'I don't know, but I am very angry. I particularly wished you to be sensible with Mr Whisperley.'

'Mr Whisperley was strongly moved. Pelleas——'

'Pandora, stop talking about that ridiculous cat. I won't have it.'

Pandora's lip quivered. She turned away.

'Good-night,' she said. 'I think I'll go into the garden. My head aches a little.'

'My darling,' cried Lady Pennington, who melted at a symptom. 'I only meant——'

'I know. I know. It is not me. But I can't bear you to speak cruelly of Pelleas. He's been with us so lately and is coming on so well. Besides—I hate to say it—but it's not cricket to take advantage of a cat just because he isn't there.'

CHAPTER VI.

'On the fifth day I struck Bulukraal,' said the Colonel, and in a pause gauged with the nicety of an old performer returned the melon, disbanded the Brazils, and drank port in a modest silence. It was at that moment so precious, so historic, that Pandora passed the open window. . . .

James Fullerton stole a look of extreme cunning at Andrew Whisperley and was satisfied. Richard Pennington, acting as host could not, he knew, leave the table, and the vicar was clipping a cigar. With the air of a man who has left his pipe in a pocket of an ulster hanging in the cloakroom, he murmured and slipped out of the room. From the drawing-room some one—he presumed Miss Macadoo—was singing in a thin persistent voice to Lady Pennington and Mrs Pinyon, whose close conference in whispers over the fire was only disturbed by an occasional 'Thank you, dear, how seldom one hears the old songs now,' and 'Just one more, *please*,' then in a passionate undertone, 'But I daren't say anything, they'd simply leave. I thought when the laundry rose again —but no. They have no conscience. There's a spirit abroad . . . *Sweet*, dear—*sweet*—oh, how nice, I was afraid that was the last verse. And *Pandora*——'

The autumn night was soundless. The fragrant scents of a summer that was already past lingered and mingled with the sweet odours of falling leaves and damp soil. A veil of gray mist hung above the valley below the terrace, and from its heart came up clear and melodious the scurrying of hidden waters. In that unseen country

of silence into which even the rays of the moon did not pierce, there moved a little world of little creatures wholly engrossed upon their own minute affairs. Rabbits and weasels, mice and owls, tiny flickering trout and eels, with the wild duck flying in from the marshes of Pevensey, and the solitary vigil of the heron.

James passed swiftly down the grass walk and halted at the paddock gate. No sign of Pandora. He turned to the right, and quickening his pace was suddenly brought face to face with her at the corner of the pergola. She had left her scarf in the hall and evidently snatched up the nearest wrap (a tartan rug) and thrown it around her shoulders. Her uncovered hair, now a little dishevelled, her white upturned face with the disturbing crimson lips, the ivory throat, and the long enveloping plaid of green gave her the forlorn appearance of a gipsy child.

'I wanted to speak to you,' she said. 'Shall we do it now?'

Something of the romantic beauty of the night departed as though in a place of haunted lamps one had been extinguished. Pandora was so confoundedly unexpected. Took one off one's guard. Said baffling and obscure things which led up to nothing.

'There's a seat over there.'

She walked a little ahead of him and he trod rather moodily behind. He had thought when she smiled at him after dinner . . . And now Pandora was in one of her concise competent neutral moods. She was dressed like a creature of the woods, primitive, passionate, and she talked or threatened to talk like an assistant secretary. But how like Pandora. Most damnably like.

The moonlight streamed placidly upon the pale sadness of her lips and eyes. A faint breeze laden with all the gathered secrets of night was in her hair.

'One should speak in whispers on such a night as this,' she said, 'low, sorrowful whispers, not the Pinyon kind.

How perfectly tremendous to be alone in the heart of some African forest with the sound of a tom-tom far away. I read that in a book last night, and I was so excited I got up—at three—with a moon and everything—and walked down into the valley. Just like that. The grass was cold as ice and the owls—is there any sound like the falling voices of the owls . . .?'

'In my little book of occasional thoughts——' began James, who had a bit on owls too.

'I wish I was a boy, James. Not a study in half-tones like you—but perhaps I shouldn't say that. Forgive me, James.'

'There is,' he said gloomily, 'no harm done. But this I must say in no uncertain voice. If you had asked me to accompany you into the valley—I would have gone.'

'But alone, James? Oh, I do hope you would have gone alone. Don't answer if you prefer not.'

'However painful, however destructive such a statement may be,' he said, with Fullerton courage, 'rather than leave my bed I would have—have—pardon me, I cannot think of some sufficiently drastic alternative.'

'I'm sorry.'

'I must be honest,' said James, with quiet satisfaction.

'It makes it easier, of course, I mean for me. You will understand better now.'

'Why,' he asked politely, 'should a lack of interest in owls make anything easier?'

'I meant about your letter,' and added helpfully, 'the one about marrying me.'

'It was difficult to write——'

'I thought it a very nice letter,' remarked Pandora approvingly. 'I'm only sorry——'

'You mean——'

'That I can't, dear James. Not conscientiously. In France I nearly did. But—that was different.'

'In what way? Either you care about me or you don't.'

Pandora gave no sign. She had, for all he could tell, said all she considered essential. She stared into the unseen valley with a remoteness which seemed to separate her and the nearness of her vast continents or centuries of time.

'Both, James—both. That's where the crisis comes in.'

'I don't understand,' he said, just like the best kind of modern actor.

'Don't try, James. I find it beyond myself. Oh, dear, how personal this is becoming. Would you mind if we spoke about me as some one else?'

'I don't un——' But he checked himself. He was rooted to the seat and the best actors always walk across the turf and fling away a cigar before they make that stern admission.

'I am so sure it would make things so much less ridiculous and like a novel. For instance, I could tell you in strict confidence just what Pandora has said about you, then you can say how upset you are and grateful for knowing in time. And then,' hurried on Pandora in a glow of creation, 'for a touch of pathos—as you can't have Pandora you turn with beautiful resignation to me—but of course that's the same thing. . . . Shall I begin?' she asked.

'If you please,' said James coldly.

'Please understand anything I say about Pandora is in confidence. I mean it might seem to a malicious person that I was running her down.'

'I—I understand,' said James, and hastily lit a cigarette.

'Sometimes I am often awfully put out and disgusted with Pandora. Other times—not often—I am so delighted with the way she behaves that I would trust her with

a child. With *you*, James. But I know the girl better than that. I've watched her for twenty years and I like you too much to let her play her pranks——'

'But in France I thought she and I really understood one another.'

'Of course you did. Everybody feels that way with her. And Pandora thinks so too. At the time. But she is not dependable. Not exactly erratic but greedy. She asks for so much.'

'You mean she sets a high standard? Why not?'

'In France she looked on you as a man of mystery. You did not say much, you always looked as though you knew so much more than the others. I saw quite important generals muttering into your ear.'

James bowed his head. He remembered those red-faced, stuttering confidences flowing inward on a breeze of sparkling wine, those old renovated stories which bearded warriors had shared in Alexander's camp. Little children. All in a blaze with their ribbons and spurs and innocent china eyes. . . .

'Yes,' he said thoughtfully.

'I hate to go on. This is where I loathe Pandora. But sometimes she feels about a hundred years younger than you——'

'She will grow up.'

'And then at other times quite a hundred years older. That's where you get squeezed, James. She'd always be running back to fetch you, or crawling breathlessly towards middle age.'

'I'm not middle-aged. I may look it. I may sometimes feel it. But I'm not. Thirty isn't middle age. The barber said only yesterday that my sort of hair——'

'*I* may know, James, but does Pandora? At dinner to-night she said she had no idea you were so mature and static. That was the word she used. Static. Dependable. Family solicitorish.'

'I cannot help that,' said James sternly. 'I inherited my face. It served its purpose in the seventies. It was a face known all over the religious world. People hung it up in their bedrooms. I suppose they liked to wake up and start the day in a spirit of Christian resignation. I don't know. I only say don't talk of my face as though it were an individual. It's like a respected company—a limited company. But behind this face—well, I simply daren't speak of the kind of thing that goes on.'

'She may misjudge you, James. Perhaps she does. She imagines you farming for about seventy years in Wiltshire, and the nice little memorial notice in the local press. She sees you getting stouter and saying the things every right-minded elderly landowner says after eating. She said you would be greatly respected,' concluded the mutual friend with awe.

'This,' he replied, 'must make a difference. I knew Pandora was very young, very unexperienced, an only child. But this is too much.'

'Oh!' (coldly).

'I know the real James Fullerton, that's all.'

'Is he so very wonderful?'

'No, but he won't stand this sort of attitude. Not for a moment. He's not that kind. And when I tell him, it is only my duty to do so, he'll probably shrug his shoulders.'

'Well?'

'We have to remember Pandora—that's all.'

'My dear man, don't worry about her.'

'But I do worry. I *must* worry. And I have to think of Fullerton. He is my most intimate friend. He is the most remarkable fellow I know. But with him it is different. He is a man of the world. Besides, he has made up his mind to marry the girl.'

'Has he? Well, please tell him that she has not the smallest intention of marrying him or any one.'

'It would serve no good purpose. It would only accelerate matters.'

'But I will not marry him.'

'*You!* Oh, you mean Pandora.'

'Don't be ridiculous any more. I say I will not marry——'

'Very well.'

'It has been most amusing,' said Pandora, without a note of laughter. 'Good-night.'

'What I have said was in earnest,' said James, rising. 'you understand.'

'Then you *are* serious. My dear, please don't be serious. I thought for a moment you were joking; or were we both joking?'

'You were getting cross, Pandora.'

'Perhaps.'

'Why will you not have me, Pandora? It is only wasting time.'

'I have told you.'

'But you don't understand what you're up against. I am concentrating on you with all my forces. The will to win. It's only a question of time, Pandora.'

'Not only——'

'I know I could give you a good time.'

'I don't want a good time. I want to live my own life.'

'Alone?'

'Dear James, we are on the fringe of an argument as old as the moon. I set a price on my freedom. I love life. I adore people. I must see things and hear things. But I set a price on my freedom—that is all. Am I very selfish or merely frank?'

'I am not discouraged,' he said, smiling a little grimly.

She looked at him gravely for a moment, then a smile flashed back into her eyes.

'I will report what you have said,' she remarked. 'Pandora will be sorry but firm.'

'And I will talk it over with Fullerton. But I know him. He will not be sorry, only very, very firm.'

'Good-night, Mr Delegate.'

'Good-night, Ambassadress.'

She went slowly down the path and turned where the ramblers trailed over a rustic archway.

'Funny old James,' she said.

'Adorable Pandora,' he called after her.

But she was gone.

CHAPTER VII

I

'I THINK,' said Richard Pennington, 'we had better join the ladies.' Even to words more familiar to the upper households of the Empire than the plays of William Shakespeare, the collected works of Hardy or the Song of Solomon, he gave a charming resonance and intimacy.

In the drawing-room Miss Macadoo had ceased to sing and was therefore in a position to learn from Mrs Pinyon, who had to be careful what she ate, the insidious and menacing character of symptoms frequently belittled.

'A meal,' said Mrs Pinyon, and added with a little grimace, 'of bismuth. You take it and come back. I spent the time between in the Park. I just sat and watched the people. I thought it best not to excite myself in any way. Yes. And then I returned by bus —they run, you know, along Park Lane, and as I was early I walked from Selfridges' and——'

Mrs Pinyon ceased quite suddenly to speak. It was as though her thin vocal chord had snapped. In her eyes, now resting upon a door thronged with the faces of four diners, was an expression of mild reproach.

Lady Pennington became instantly brisk. She, like all the generals of text-books, separated the forces of the enemy, blockading poor old Streeten, who was hustled into a corner with Mrs Pinyon, and segregating the vicar and Miss Macadoo by rushing into action that Big Bertha of domestic life, the piano.

Miss Macadoo had accompanied gentlemen both single and married for a score of years. Over her patient head had fluted, roared, or quavered, tenors, basses, or samples of both. It was no news to her that a gentleman with a suit-case of songs in the hall had a cold or was out of practice, or simply did not sing. She must somewhere have stored quiet memories of basses who began well and descended into an abyss from which they never returned, baritones who made a false start and after maintaining a poignant tenor came into their kingdom, tenors who commenced in a confidential falsetto and after a heroic struggle flickered like expiring candles and went out. Miss Macadoo had never considered the matter. She thought it nice to have a little music. Yes, she would gladly accompany Mr Pinyon in the 'Bo'swain's Wedding.'

The vicar had a very loud voice. That was what one felt about it. It was the kind of voice which a British public can never hear without an appreciative burst of applause at the end of each verse and a perfect tornado of clapping at the finish. The vicar not only sang loudly but like those favourites of the British public he looked it. His whole being emphasised splendid ungrudging exertion. Verse after verse, each supported by a rollicking chorus—each louder than the last, and above it all, watchful and triumphant, Mr Pinyon himself.

The way was clear for Richard Pennington. He drooped towards Andrew Whisperley, who nodded with emphasis, and slipping round the corner of the room as though to enjoy Mr Pinyon the better in the darkness they passed discreetly on to the lawn. Behind them, as it were an avenging voice, came in measured, ominous tones :—

'The night was black and the gale ran high,
Heave ho, me lads, heave ho.'

'A cigarette,' asked Richard Pennington. 'Fine song that. Full of movement.'

They walked steadily away.

'I heard it last in Devonshire,' said Andrew Whisperley, 'long ago. Brings it all back.'

They continued to walk steadily away.

In the twilight of that softly luminous night they paced quietly into the shadows of the trees and conferred together in low confidential tones in a striking resemblance to two specialists not profoundly upset but at the same time personally interested in a particular case. How to maintain the stamina of the patient and above all keep him intrigued or distracted until the crisis was past, or another crisis in sight, such was their proud and sacred task. There were times when the patient must be cajoled, anæsthetised, or scared. Upon occasions he could, with advantage, be led to believe he was prescribing for himself. That was always a triumph, and left the doctor in a most secure and enviable position. It was also a recognised method in petulant cases to operate upon some slightly affected area and thus attract a meddlesome attention from a danger spot.

To Richard Pennington and Andrew Whisperley the symptoms of the public, that huge ingenuous body, were evidenced and emphasised through the columns of the press, the speeches and copious works of retired admirals and field-marshals, the questions of Parliamentarians, and the official letter-box. It may be said at once that Richard Pennington and Andrew Whisperley were not embittered or hurt. An absolute silence from the public would have caused them the gravest alarm.

'Things are pretty rocky just now,' remarked Richard Pennington, flicking the ash from his cigar. 'I was talking to Winter last night. You know. Been Parliamentary Secretary to the Ministry of Delusions. What an amazing fiasco that department has been. Of course

it never had a chance. Think of them. Spalding, charming fellow, but——'

'I know,' said Mr Whisperley, 'but he was streets above Coveter and the Minister.'

'Ministers don't really matter,' remarked Mr Pennington, 'but the great blunder was in drafting in so many of the Ministry of Waste. One realises places must be found for demobilised staffs, but the Ministry of Waste—'

'Bit thick, I'll own,' said Mr Whisperley.

'And at the moment things are bad. I doubt if the Government will stand another three months. You saw Firebrand's article in this morning—"Damn Them," you must have seen it.'

'I did. And I hear Field-Marshal Senile's big book *Blast* will be out in a day or two,' said Whisperley, with proper gravity.

'The situation,' concluded Mr Pennington, puffing without emotion, 'turns one cold.'

Andrew Whisperley grunted. He was not greatly concerned about the future. But then he was in the Treasury. Feeling that some statement was called for he remarked indifferently, 'The situation is always grave.'

'It is most unfortunate,' went on Mr Pennington peevishly, 'that just at a moment when the Government would give anything to win support or distract public attention that old fool Burgin should write his book on the Navy, that the expenditure of the Ministry of Contracts should become public property, and the strike of the railways recommence. It is enough to seriously embarrass any Government. It is essential that some immediate action should be taken. *At once.*'

Andrew Whisperley nodded.

'They've asked you to go into this new Ministry, I hear,' he asked, abruptly.

'Yes, as Permanent Secretary, but it's all in the air.

Beyond yourself, I don't know whether they have a single civil servant of experience.'

'This Minister.'

'They say—dear me—a name beginning with H.' Mr Whisperley stared with sustained ferocity into the night.

'The public demand a business man.'

'Good God!' from Mr Pennington with feeling.

'The idea was of course Winterton's. Won't last.'

'I don't know,' said Mr Pennington, who had substantial reasons for hoping it would. 'Ah! It was Humbleford—yes, the name was assuredly Humbleford. Dear me, you mentioned it before dinner. The press is full of it. Winterton said he was the only man. The public are insistent.'

'And who is he?'

Richard Pennington became extraordinarily confidential.

'None of us know,' he said, 'and it would set a damaging precedent to ask.'

'Naturally,' agreed Mr Whisperley. 'Most improper.'

'The refusal of the Stationery Office to sanction copies of *Who's Who* has closed the only door to acquiring information on the subject,' pursued Mr Pennington. 'In the meantime it cannot affect us.'

'Is he likely to come to the office?' asked Mr Whisperley, as though the new Minister were a partially trained but quite exceptional baboon.

Mr Pennington brooded over such an appalling suggestion.

'Surely not,' he said, but without conviction.

'They offered the job to Wyncote, Snape, Bebington, and Anstruther,' said Andrew Whisperley, without hope, 'They wouldn't look at it. Too dangerous. Too idealistic. Besides, it's a stunt.'

'For a Minister—yes,' said Mr Pennington, with the

aloof note of a man before whom Ministries come and go. 'I agree it is a stunt. But you never can tell.'

'No—you never can tell.'

Mr Pennington having thus chatted affably upon generalities drew near to a matter more intimate.

'By the way,' he said, 'did you have any conversation with my niece Pandora? Extraordinary how that child has matured since I saw her last. Her views on America, for instance. They bore out all my own conclusions surprisingly—quite surprisingly.'

'Miss Pennington is competent,' replied Andrew Whisperley finally. 'She has a clear grasp of detail. Her outlook is moderate. I understand she has had experience of Government work.'

'Considerable, Whisperley, considerable. I am not at all certain whether she would not return if a suitable opening presented itself.'

Andrew Whisperley was suddenly aware of a star in the sky.

'Would she?' he remarked. 'Would she, do you think, care for the job of secretary? I am in rather a hole.'

Mr Pennington appeared to bend his mind to the point.

'I am inclined to believe it might be arranged,' he said deliberately. 'Would you leave it in my hands?'

Yes, Mr Whisperley was content.

II

It was ten o'clock. The cat, the night growing chilly, had returned to the library, and was not without hope that Lady Pennington would cease to confide in a piercing and breathless whisper into her brother-in-law's ear and

betake herself to bed. The clock, indifferent to Penningtons, Ministries, and cats, ticked monotonously on. The Colonel had departed. Upstairs, Miss Macadoo was soothing a very natural headache. Mr Whisperley, on the other hand, was settling down to a nice little lot of files. The stage, in short, was cleared.

'I am so relieved,' confided Lady Pennington. 'I knew you would succeed, Richard. All the time the dear vicar was singing those breezy songs of his, I was thinking of you and poor Andrew Whisperley, such a clever man, but *how* difficult, Richard. Peter always used to say his rudeness covered a shy and sensitive nature. But how he barked at Pandora. I suppose that is the official way, Richard. And then Pandora told that silly tale about a cat. Nerves, of course. The child was on edge.'

'Whisperley is a strange fellow,' agreed Mr Pennington. 'I'm afraid his tendency to contradict people has been a great drawback to him.'

'And his clothes,' said Lady Pennington.

'He was always neglected,' admitted Mr Pennington. 'At the same time there is no denying his ability. I do hope Pandora will find him congenial.'

He stroked the cat dubiously.

'It is the only way and the best way,' said Lady Pennington comfortably.

'Yes, Mary—oh, yes. But I was wondering, simply an idea, you know.'

'You aren't going back, Richard?'

'No, no. But do you think that perhaps I ought to take Pandora under me? Is it not my duty?'

'Nonsense, Richard. You are far too busy with other things. It is good of you, but this arrangement is better, far better.'

Richard Pennington gave his sister-in-law a veiled but unfriendly glance.

'Whi-perley is a dear good chap,' he said, 'but I must admit he is fortunate to have got the post. I wouldn't say anything against him, but—well——' he smiled his lingering Pennington smile.

Lady Pennington nodded rather distractedly. 'It is all very difficult,' she said. 'I do hope and pray Pandora is not in one of her moods. I think she has come in, Richard. Perhaps, if I just slip away you could explain matters. There is a way of putting things. I find with Pandora it is best to expect nothing and then you are not disappointed—only *furious*. So much in life depends upon'—Lady Pennington paused but no light came—'upon the way things are put,' she repeated heavily. 'Good-night, Richard. I will send Pandora.'

In the silent library Richard Pennington bent and again, but with uneasy fingers, caressed the cat. When he looked up Pandora was entering the room.

CHAPTER VIII.

I

RICHARD PENNINGTON received her as he was accustomed to welcome a distinguished delegate in his official capacity. An appreciative flicker of mirth darted into Pandora's eyes.

'Well, uncle,' she said, 'what has mother asked you to say about it?'

'About what?' countered Mr Pennington.

'I don't know, it might be all sorts of things. Dear mother. What a comfort her worries are to her.'

'Really, Pandora, I think you are a little unkind to your mother. That she worries—since you use the word —about you, is not perhaps altogether unnatural. Forgive me if I speak as your father's brother and,' with a sententious note, 'quite an old man.'

Pandora made a little boyish gesture.

'Now you will think me horrid,' she said, 'but I am so certain I am only considerate that you must forget you are nearly fifty.'

'Sixty,' corrected Mr Pennington, softening.

'I will never believe it. To me you are going to be about thirty-five, the Elizabethan age for a man. Be thirty-five, Uncle Dick.'

'Dick!' echoed Mr Pennington, very shocked. 'Come, Pandora——'

'You'll like it when the first shivery feeling has passed. Listen now: "Uncle Dick, have you booked those stalls

for to-night?" "Uncle Dick is the court marked?" "Uncle Dick——"'

'Enough—enough!' expostulated Mr Pennington, greatly elevated.

'That's better. Now, Uncle Dick, we can talk like people. It's such a mistake to live like a Henry James novel, isn't it? Most people live like novels, or is it the other way round? . . . Before you have your turn, let me plead mother's case. Don't act too hastily. You can with me—I love it. But you may wound poor mother, who simply must lay booby traps and then fall into them herself. I'm not joking. Don't you understand that mother lives on worries and that there is no medical treatment for such advanced cases. When father was alive he used to throw her a worry. It was weak, but how could one see her dear face so tired and anxious. And at once—like a person with a drug—the expression cleared and we were all so happy knowing she had something on her mind again.'

'Pandora, this is heartless!'

'Uncle Dick, Uncle Dick, where has your thirty-five gone? You think mother is worried about the house, about the ducks, about Blinkhorn, and last of all about me. I thought so. She's been talking. She's had a field day about it all and now she'll be sleeping like an infant, her dear face like a happy seraph's with all the topping worries she's arranged for to-morrow. When I came back from my work I found her thinner, older, off her food, and *crushed*. She was living alone with a housekeeper who did what she was told and whom nothing would induce to give notice, and I believe another six months would have killed her. But to-day. Look at her. Has she ever looked better, has she ever eaten better, has she ever been so, so, let's call it occupied—you know the word with a W?'

'This is absurd, of course,' remarked Mr Pennington,

considerably disturbed, 'but, as a matter of fact, I was struck, really struck, by her evident spirits and improved health. At the same time, the country——'

'Uncle Richard, be a Dick. You know she thinks she loathes the country. The country *occupies* her. She has had a larger accumulation of little—little *occupations*, you understand, than she dreamt possible. And then to top all she has laid the foundation stone of quite a new and promising Worry (with a capital W.) with you. I have seen it in her eye all day, and this evening she is positively *girlish*.'

'I am not persuaded, Pandora, but I admit beneath your dreadful modern irreverence there may be a grain of regrettable truth.'

'Uncle Dick, I wonder if we will ever get rid of your official mind.'

Mr Pennington positively leaped back.

'No, no, Pandora,' he cried, with genuine alarm, 'leave me to perish in ignominy. I am too old for you. I will admit anything, but for Heaven's sake keep your kindness for your mother.'

'And yet,' said Pandora, regarding him thoughtfully, 'and yet——'

'I assure you I'm hopeless, Pandora. I know it. I'm incurable. The only home for people like me is a Government office. All the worst cases are detained there.'

'Uncle Dick,' said Pandora gravely, 'you've made a joke. I will not despair of you. But I have a great many other people on my hands. Some of them are very serious. And simply as a case Mr Whisperley would be oceans more tempting.'

'Whisperley,' echoed Mr Pennington to himself, 'that is my cue,' and aloud, 'Might I say something now, Pandora?'

'So long as you realise how serious the consequences may be.'

'I hope I am discreet. Now, Pandora, apart from your mother, let us speak about yourself.'

'A moment. Is this a cosy chat with my nice Uncle Dick or a conference of an official nature with Uncle Richard representing certain interests which should be discussed and adjourned for a committee to report upon?'

Mr Pennington shrank from committing himself.

'I beg of you to be serious, Pandora,' he pleaded.

'Obviously,' she remarked with decision, 'a conference.'

She rose, and opening a drawer in the writing-bureau, drew out a pair of enormous horn spectacles—the F.O. kind. Then pulling up a small table, she unscrewed one of those majestic Waterman pens which never lose heart even during the longest minute, laid a sheet of foolscap before Mr Pennington and herself, and remarked: 'When I was secretary to the Propaganda Sub-Committee of the Ministry of Crises I found these spectacles made all the difference. Their moral support was simply enormous. To me they were a kind of Magic Carpet. One could sack a cook in these spectacles. . . . Bustle along, Uncle Richard. What are the terms of reference? Where is the agenda . . .?'

'Pandora—please. I simply desire to say that in the course of conversation with your mother I mentioned to her that a new and supremely important Ministry is to be established at once, with which I, and I may add Mr Whisperley, are concerned. I suggested that perhaps you—in view of your official experience and your evident abilities, might care to interest yourself in what is, we all trust, likely to prove work of the most important national service. It is a little difficult for me, even confidentially, to mention with any sense of accuracy the functions of this Ministry—I speak largely on hear-say and intuition—but I can say with confidence that there is every assurance in official circles of the urgent need for a *competent body* to organise upon a proper

basis the adjustment and concentration of national activities to a definite and practical issue——'

'How it all comes back,' murmured Pandora dreamily, 'and now you rise, Uncle Richard, look at your gold watch, and say, "Mr Chairman, if you will excuse me, I have another conference," and somebody else carries on.'

'I thought,' pursued Mr Pennington, choking back his natural indignation, 'that it offered an exceptional opportunity for any one like yourself with time at her disposal. I even went so far as to speak to Mr Whisperley —quite informally, of course—just an *idea*.'

'Whose?' questioned Pandora, 'Only yours, poor Uncle Dick?'

'I was surprised to learn that he has an opening—an excellent one. In short, a secretaryship.'

'His secretary?' asked Pandora.

'Yes, his secretary. He will represent the interests of the Treasury. An important post. Tell me, Pandora, does the proposal interest you? Or would you prefer to discuss it to-morrow? Dear me, there's eleven o'clock.'

Pandora polished her spectacles. Then she adjusted them and stared at Mr Pennington with a gravity which made him uneasy. He understood rather painfully what Lady Pennington had struggled to convey when she said the walls shrieked with laughter.

'My mother,' said Pandora, veiling her eyes.

'Is prepared,' shot out Mr Pennington.

'To lose me,' asked Pandora, still looking down.

'She only considers your happiness,' remarked Mr Pennington, and hastily stroked the cat for the third and last time. The cat, with a glance of collected profanity, rose, stretched, and left the room by the open window.

'And you, after all I've told you, are ready to—to—— Why, mother will never forgive you, once she realises.'

'Realises what?'

'That there's nobody to—you know. Except Blinkhorn.'

'Blinkhorn is going with you. To look after you.'

Pandora shut her spectacles with a snap.

'She is committing suicide,' she said. 'I won't leave her. So that's that.' There was a shadow flung by the moonlight on the open window. James Fullerton came quietly into the room.

'Hallo,' he said, 'don't move. I'm just going to bed. Good-night.'

'James,' said Pandora. 'Wouldn't *you* like a job?'

'What sort of a job?'

'Government office. I have just been offered one.'

'Which, of course, you've refused?'

'Why "of course"?'

James shrugged his shoulders. He congratulated himself on his strong, silent pose.

'Because the very idea is too ridiculous to discuss. Out of the question.'

In the process of lighting a cigarette he did not notice Pandora's eyes. In some ways it was a pity.

'The Government,' he said, turning on Mr Pennington with severity, 'should not look to girls to carry out its duties. It is simply playing on a misguided sense of patriotism. Two years ago—perhaps.'

Still Pandora said nothing. Considerably encouraged in this nice authoritative note, he walked steadily onwards into a morass from which there was no returning.

'I would not have mentioned it,' he said, 'but Lady Pennington asked me whether there were not openings in the War Office. I took the opportunity of discouraging the idea then.'

'You took the opportunity,' repeated Pandora in awe, 'you did a little quiet Prussianism on your own account. You come back from the War and think you can ride

roughshod over people, and talk them down and argue and lay down the law.'

'Pandora,' he cried in an anguished voice.

'Go to bed, please. Uncle Richard, I've decided to accept. At once. Kindly wake Mr Whisperley and my mother. And Blinkhorn. Let them all come here. I will leave by the eight o'clock train with you and Mr Whisperley.'

'But surely, Pandora——' said Mr Pennington, who was only a moderate riser.

'I have decided. I pack now or not at all. Please knock them at once.'

Mr Pennington, looking a very aged man, left the room and could be heard ascending the stairs. In the dark passage he encountered James with a cold cigarette still clutched in one hand.

'Would you,' he asked, with an access of courtesy, 'mind just waking my sister-in-law? Then I can be getting along with the others.' He paused, and receiving no reply, shook his head, and overtaken by the awful prospect ahead, stumbled on and was presently to be heard tapping on remote but scandalised doors.

'She called me static,' groaned James Fullerton. '*Static*,' he muttered, seeing the huge unbelievable figure of Lady Pennington revealed by a flickering candle. '*Static!*' he repeated feelingly, aware of the sudden and moving appearance of Mr Whisperley, evidently under the impression the house was on fire.

The pilgrims of the night crept near. Throughout history the queens of the earth have awaited in remote majesty such miserable shufflings of the discomfited. Upon the written page even a university professor grows tepid at the feline splendour of a Cleopatra, while the modern production, supported by trumpets and rolling drums and camels and brown gentlemen with bracelets

uttering nasal howls, with Miss Lily Brayton on the stage quite indifferent to the austere propriety of Mr William Archer in the stalls, is so terrific that the thunder 'off' is at the present price of labour gratuitous if not actually a faggot to Bolshevism.

Pandora might have stood facing the door—*alone*. (That there was nobody else there is obvious, but the intelligent reader will snap the point.) She might, in the moment of her grave decision, in the imminent departure from her only mother and her home, have gazed into the night. Instead of which she spent the precious moments in the innocent and childish pastime of kissing her fingers to herself in the Queen Anne mirror and, by way of contrast, thrusting the horn spectacles aggressively on the tip of her nose, and assuming a bleak official stare.

The pilgrims of the night drew nearer. . . .

II

When James came down to breakfast Pandora had gone. Also Richard Pennington. Also Andrew Whisperley. They had, as it were, been caught up in an official tornado, leaving a melancholy Macadoo atmosphere behind them. She was, of course, about. At breakfast she sat at the head of the table in place of Lady Pennington, now sleeping like a good child after a crisis.

Miss Macadoo had passed a wakeful night, being an occasional sleeper and having, as already mentioned, a steady old-fashioned headache. Lady Pennington before seeking her splendid repose had creaked in at 2 a.m., and whispered, whispered . . . Then, gathering her draperies about her, had ordered Miss Macadoo to go to sleep *at once*, and creaked with studied caution, and no sense of silence, down the corridor. At about

3 a.m. Pandora came so quietly that Miss Macadoo, who was entirely awake, uttered a despairing scream, and started up in bed. Pandora, in a rich, sombre dressing-gown, her neck and shoulders uncovered, her fine, abundant hair tied in two mediæval plaits, a candle held high in her right hand, stared with composure at Miss Macadoo. The boards were cold to her bare toes, but she had made the miserable Macadoo jump. All through the long night, while she spurned and admonished her mother, rated her uncle, and assured Mr Whisperley he must be tired and cold (which he longed to admit but daren't)—during all that anxious and even tragic time, this bromide, this belated Victorian, this Macadoo, had lain in snug and contemptible indifference, sipping her midnight tea, pecking like a sick bird at her bedside texts for solitary hours, while the very Empire kept vigil in the library. To Pandora that scene downstairs had been terrific, fateful, ominous. In that exceedingly chilly and silent room, with a fire which had expired at about one, and a clock which was not satisfied with reminding them all it was two and might be three, but had nudged them at the quarters and half hours, with the watchful night outside and Blinkhorn packing by candlelight upstairs—all this was so dramatic as to be unforgettable. It was so like something in the life of Charles I., or was it the awakening of Victoria, or Abraham Lincoln before the battle of somewhere—that kind of scene? But the last two ounces of sheer delight had been withheld. One ounce was Miss Macadoo. The other was James Fullerton.

'Pandora,' quavered Miss Macadoo, 'how you frightened me.'

Pandora, who had gleaned a side glance at her remarkable resemblance to Marguerite of Anjou, or Mary Stuart, or Catharine of Aragon—no, perhaps not that one—at least some famous lady hung in the Academy

before execution, unbent so much as to admit that she was Pandora.

'Are you ill?' asked Miss Macadoo, whose mind between 10 p.m. and 7 a.m. was centred altogether on bed socks, cascara, the next world, and burglars.

'No,' replied Pandora stiffly. 'I have never felt better in my life. I have come to say good-bye—that's all.'

The woeful Miss Macadoo fought with a yawn and was ultimately vanquished. With apologetic eyes she let it through.

'I heard you were going,' she said, helpless under such trying circumstances.

Pandora regarded herself gloomily in the long wardrobe mirror. For, suddenly, by some spoken word she was aware her mother had forestalled her. She had an inspired vision of Lady Pennington confiding, reiterating, withdrawing, and advancing her shrouded head, and Miss Macadoo supported by pillows hearing about it all. Sipping her midnight tea over it. . . .

'I hope you'll be happy,' said Miss Macadoo, and added quite naturally, 'not lonely in London.'

'I shall be too busy,' returned Pandora with brevity, secretly longing for her to give a little awe to the occasion. Miss Macadoo was out of awe. She had a portentous Low Church solemnity, but that is quite another article.

'There's nothing like work,' she contributed, and having lost her hot water bottle and not daring to send out a search party, was surprised by another yawn, which she endeavoured to carry off by administering little playful pats to her mouth.

'This new Ministry will be *everything*—or—or nothing,' said Pandora. 'Uncle Richard says it may avert all the Labour troubles. And to-morrow I'm going to

meet the new Minister, John Humbleford—did mother tell you that?'

'No, she spoke about Blinkhorn and sending you vegetables and eggs.'

'You've heard of John Humbleford, of course?'

Miss Macadoo concentrated. She assumed, with quiet heroism, some outward resemblance to profound meditation. Perceiving that Pandora was not in the mood to succour her, she repeated, 'Humbleford—Humbleford,' without hope.

'He is an enthusiast, an orator, a man of vision,' remarked Pandora, 'he sees things and does things.'

Miss Macadoo had heard of such people. She had, like quite a number of contemporaries, in official life and out, her own views about human explosives. She was also remindful of Lady Pennington's shrill summing up: 'It's a change for her. Pandora takes a thing up—that's her nature. When she's tired of it she'll find something new. She's *enthusiastic*.'

'They'll make a pair of it,' was what Miss Macadoo said in the strictest confidence to herself. 'I'm sure we'd all be very thankful for a man like that,' she remarked with some animation, having cornered the bottle. 'I sometimes wonder, lying awake here, whether we won't all be murdered in our beds some night. Don't you think it was very foolish demobilising that great army, dear? Think what a lesson it would have been to Liverpool or Dublin—places like that—if Sir Douglas Haig had let off *all* his guns. I'd have done it,' said Miss Macadoo, with a bleak, inhospitable stare, and hugging her knees with her stiff fingers. 'Another thing . . .'

Pandora had one or two golden, if unchristian, laws of conduct. She never let herself be bored without sound reason.

'Now, I simply cannot stay,' she said. 'It's too bad

of you to keep me up when I leave in about two hours. You've talked enough. Go to sleep *at once.*'

Suddenly Miss Macadoo found herself alone. Without delay she crept from her bed, crossed the carpet, and locked the door. Apparently not wholly reassured she pushed the couch against it. There only remained the other door leading to Lady Pennington's bathroom, which she shared. Perhaps, to make certain . . .

To her horror and dismay it was opening slowly, silently. . . . Round the corner appeared the shrouded head of Lady Pennington just as the clock struck a quarter to four.

'I heard most . . . Not all . . . Now, dear, tell me *everything.* . . .'

In a tragic silence Miss Macadoo crawled heavily into bed.

III

And still the night dragged on. Richard Pennington, who was asleep at twelve or not at all, was smoking a cigar and staring at the end of his bed. Andrew Whisperley was turning over a few urgent files in his head. Blinkhorn, having packed, was dozing on the sofa in the servant's hall, a prey to the cat who, being first overtaken by an overwhelming desire to go out by the window, was an hour later a determined suppliant at the door. Only James Fullerton slept like an infant. His healthy regular breathing was audible to Pandora as she paused outside his door. The sound revolted her. She knew, however unusual, that it simply must not go on. A grown man who could quietly sneak off to bed and then become unconscious and continue so, was a thousand times more opprobrious than a Macadoo. What did he care that they were all taking part in the birth of a

nation? A snore, inoffensive but certainly a snore, was her reply. What was it to him that his country was at the cross-roads, and that a new Ministry was being hastily instituted to save civilisation and unearned income? A snore, not so inoffensive, was her sole acknowledgment.

'I will go in,' said Pandora, and did.

With proper indignation she lit the two candles on the dressing-table, the two on the mantelpiece, the one by his bed. She dragged up a chair, and sitting abruptly down regarded him in his weakness with passionate resentment.

He continued to sleep.

Pandora waited. While she waited she had a good look at James.

'Perhaps,' she thought, staring very hard, 'I oughtn't to sit staring like this.'

In the best novels the hero, turning over on his back, murmurs the heroine's name, and the heroine, shielding her candle, goes out into the night. The hero never knows—only the reader. But of course it makes a difference. James Fullerton, twisting his head, blinked and said, 'Damn the candle,' thinking, poor deluded young man, that he'd left it on.

That settled Pandora. That was her cue for a statement of her official position.

'Just what I might have guessed,' she burst out resentfully, 'little you care, lying there snoring in your pyjamas and everything——'

'Is some one ill?'

'Please don't waken. I wouldn't disturb you for worlds. But I wonder if you realise how horribly selfish you are.'

'Eh?'

'What do you care if I am still up? What does it matter to you if I will be gone before you're out of bed

to-morrow—to-day, I mean? Nothing at all. It's better you should know—that's all.'

'Pandora—could you reach that dressing-gown?'

'You will not require it. I refuse to stay. There is nothing to be said.'

'Pardon me, there is quite a lot. You butt into my room with a blaze of light, trampling upon all the most ancient laws of hospitality, and let fly. It's not playing the game. I don't feel myself. I'm struggling back to consciousness. I—I—am entitled to my dressing-gown.'

'Good-night and good-bye,' said Pandora firmly. 'As I may never see you after I go I wish to part without misunderstanding. I shall never refer to this again. I shall forget it. I hope, James, you will be happy. But how disappointing you are.'

'But, hang it all, other people go to sleep, if they get a chance.'

'Now you are being merely petulant, James. Of course they go to sleep. But there's a difference. Please don't argue. I am too tired to stay here now. Good-bye, James.' She moved towards the door.

'I say, blow out the candles,' he cried, with manly indignation.

But she had gone.

In the finely lighted room the clock struck four.

James Fullerton did not waken. He heard afar off the rumble of a motor bearing in a meaning silence the official party to the early train, but the morning had a distinct touch of frost and telepathy is still in the interesting but not practical stage.

CHAPTER IX

I

JAMES FULLERTON suddenly realised that he was going home. Sitting opposite Miss Macadoo and hearing, as in another continent, her discreet and persistent monologue, he wished he had within reach his little book of thoughtful passages. He felt it would make Miss Macadoo more bearable. More than that he was taken aback by the amazing, the blind infatuation that has gathered, like a protective fungus, round the idea of home. The thought of going home turned him cold. It always had. But apparently he stood alone, a solitary pioneer. Most decidedly the thing was worth a paragraph. . . .

'And I think all this Bolshevism is a great pity, don't you?' said Miss Macadoo, pouring out a thin flow of tea (her third cup).

'Rather,' said James.

He thought of the songs, books, hymns, and other manifestations of the exuberance of the human mind about home which tower in solid pyramids beside every proper piano. He knew that there is no Englishman, who, listening to an elderly lady singing a dozen or so verses about it all, does not feel strongly moved to grab his hat and slip quietly away. He had heard that successful Scotsmen, with American accents, stand wringing moist hands on Burns's Nichts, Hogmanay Nichts, Saturdays, and off nichts from Massachusetts to Musquash Pop. (Especially Pop).

'And this trading with Germany,' pursued Miss Macadoo, 'what I say is—why trade?'

James, faced by an apparent problem, schooled his expression to one of righteous wonder and indignation.

'Why?' he echoed.

Perceiving Miss Macadoo had embarked and again put out upon her land-locked sea, he returned to this preposterous legend of home and, mindful of those rough unexplored places which our novelists write about with such engulfing intimacy, recalled the moment when the taciturn Blackfoot or Zulu or some other strong lead is unashamed of the tear which splashes into his doctored firewater when Hermione sings the latest jazz refrain.

'I think this idea of a tunnel very risky,' said Miss Macadoo, 'but there again it is said the Hidden Hand—'

'Naturally,' said James, and it struck him as a strange and conclusive fact that, despite the indestructible rubbish heap upon which our sense of home is rooted, no one has ventured to applaud the lonely Esquimo who, according to the best authorities, lights a lamp of blubber, removes his clothes, and sits without hygiene for spells of six months or so in the kind of home the rest of the world seems crazy to find.

'Ha! ha!'

Miss Macadoo stopped. She had heard a laugh. From Mr Fullerton? No, Mr Fullerton was quite grave. He struck her as a very responsible, agreeable young man, and quite unlike the usual young man of to-day.

'Did some one laugh?' asked James, looking innocently about.

'It must,' said Miss Macadoo with vague assurance, 'have been one of the gardeners.'

In the ensuing pause it occurred to James as yet another deplorable instance of national waste that Miss Macadoo should be permitted, not simply to talk, but to talk without knowledge upon a variety of topics.

How much better for the general information and intellectual progress of the race if such ladies were compelled to concentrate upon one subject, say 'The History of European Morals,' and let their light shine. So that at afternoon teas, instead of taking up the burden of the Empire, introductions would point the way with their 'Miss Smith—orthopœdics. Miss Brown—Brazilian butterflies.'

Why, in short, should Miss Macadoo not——

'Miss Pennington,' he began, with the quiet casuistry of a first-class Jesuit, and detected, he thought, a slight stiffening, a frown gathering upon Miss Macadoo's face. 'Miss Pennington is a remarkable girl.'

It is the kind of thing any one can throw off over toast and marmalade. On the surface it sounds an amiable even conventional remark. But it was a bull's-eye so far as Miss Macadoo was concerned. She refilled her cup, she assisted herself to cream. She wiped the extreme corners of her mouth with her handkerchief. And all the time the atmosphere of knowing things which must not be told increased and deepened.

'I met her in France,' said James, to allow the good lady time to collect her grenades, 'she often spoke of her home, and now that I have seen it I do not wonder. That she can leave it does, I admit, astonish me.'

'Yes,' remarked Miss Macadoo with dangerous brevity. '*So I'd suppose.*'

('Now what does the woman mean by that?' pondered James. 'As a catch phrase in a provincial pantomime it would be distinctly telling, but as a contribution to the present conference it lacks body.')

'She is one of those wonderful creatures who make friends wherever they go.'

'Men friends,' sniffed Miss Macadoo. 'Pandora never bothers about women.'

'But, Miss Macadoo, her mother——'

'One would rather die than say things,' replied Miss Macadoo briskly, 'but of course it must have been obvious to every one, *as always*, that Pandora disgraced herself and her poor mother last night by the way she behaved. Well, when I was young things were very different. I can truthfully say I never remember,' concluded Miss Macadoo, 'ever sitting alone in a garden with any man, and yet I happen to know that while the vicar was singing she was out there.'

'Now you mention it,' said James, 'I *did* see Mr Whisperley leave by the French window.'

'How often I have begged her mother to be firm. But no. Pandora is an only child, has never been disciplined, and never will. She became quite suddenly a young woman, and when she is not engaged . . .'

'I beg your pardon?'

'I say when she is not engaged.'

'But she isn't—at least——'

'I don't know. She is very secretive. But where she finds all these young men I can't imagine. In my young days——'

'All what young men?' asked James, with ungrammatical warmth.

Miss Macadoo checked. She withdrew. She was not there to be shouted at.

'Another cup of coffee?' she said distantly. 'No. Then I must go. Lady Pennington will be so sorry not to see you.'

They shook hands. It was obviously hopeless to threaten, or plead, or beguile Miss Macadoo. In mediæval times—those 'good old days'—he would have acted differently. With a sigh he rang the bell and awaited Blinkhorn.

II

In the taxi, driving to his mother's house, he recalled the days of childhood. They were associated with the house in St John's Wood, towards which, through the mud and rain of an autumn afternoon he was hurrying. He could picture the fallen leaves in Abbey Road, the old, low-built white houses with the enormous and outrageous blocks of flats towering above them. And over all the unmistakable, the ever memorable blue haze of profound melancholy which haunts the place as no other.

He remembered the stages of his life most of it now so remote. As a little boy, an only child, he had played alone in the dark enclosed garden with its ancient pear-tree which blossomed profusely, but for some profound horticultural reason never went further, with the mulberry-tree, which the pigeons from Regent's Park delighted to feast upon, with the little fish-pond built so energetically by his father, and in which a diminishing party of goldfish evaded with extraordinary fortitude the daily visitations of an old but assiduous cat. In that twilight of early youth, in the dark, heavily smelling house with its immense Victorian furniture, its worn carpets, its large heavily bound books on suitably heavy subjects, its mirrors, and its candelabra, its deceased family pets, happily under glass, but even then not out of mind, its surviving family pets suffering from chronic, incurable, and always perceptible ailments—the whole accumulation of little incidents and memories came back and thronged about him.

And, above all, behind all, uniting the past and the present, and challenging the future, the room upstairs. From that room, so silent, so mysterious then and now, issued edicts, and in that room were murmurings and

long silences and sudden openings of the door as his father (worsted once again) came swearing under his breath (always under his breath) and protested he would not tolerate it a moment longer. He recalled his mother hurrying up with a distracted face, and again the closed door. He had watched doctors go up together, carrying important little bags. He had tried to hear what they said to his father in the library. And, in spite of his father's evident dejection by their words, nothing dramatic happened upstairs. Just the closed door and the shadow on the house.

It got upon everybody's mind. Servants would not stay, visitors received urgent telegrams. It was impossible to go out in case anything happened. It was out of the question to settle down to any definite occupation for fear something was wanted behind the closed door. Ever since he could remember it had been the same. His father had lived for half a century under the shadow. The tyranny went further back. There were old lingering traditions that his father's father had come off badly, and taken pneumonia with more than Christian resignation. His portrait, at the top of the stairs, presented a thin hunted face obviously ducking between two clumps of trembling dundrearies.

And James Fullerton, catching a glimpse of the tall row of poplars which hid the house from the road, felt a weakening, a cowardly instinct to drive straight on, away and away, up the Finchley Road, up Fitzjohn's Avenue (where are the Chosen People), up Hampstead High Street, and on to the open Heath.

The taxi had stopped. There was a large car before the gate. At the window he caught a glimpse of his mother's expectant face. He walked bravely up the drive and stole a quick upward glance. The closed window with its amazing curtains. Just the same.

His mother was on the steps.

'How is Grandmamma?' he asked. They adhered without dispute to the majesty of the Victorian termination.

'Dr Rocker is here, dear. Dr Bourne has just left.'

'Is she worse?'

It is impossible to express the fine anxiety in the young man's voice, the tension, the profound emotion.

'She is turning the corner.'

For half a century Grandmamma Fullerton had adroitly turned the corner. In a silence deeper than mere words they passed within the dark and reminiscent hall.

III

It was one of the vague aspirations of James Fullerton that some day he would give his little mother a thundering good time. To him she had—at least since he outgrew her at fifteen—been diminutive and helpless and 'as pretty as they make 'em.' It was also his belief, supported it must be admitted by raw facts, that his mother, who was only a child when his father had snatched her from a country vicarage, had spent thirty years in bondage. The problem during those thirty years had been what to do about it. There was Grandmamma at the top of the house and worth no one knew quite how much. She represented, most unhappily, the strong lady who upon the stage supports, somewhat grimly, a gifted family performing careless jugglery with happy smiles. Then there was James's father, recognised for quite a time as a man of promise, except by Grandmamma, who was ready to argue about it, and was, of course, proved in the end to be right. He remained a man of promise. It was, however, an accepted fact that if anything happened to Grandmamma there would be

a comfortable income. Nothing happened to Grandmamma, and at an advanced age James's father died, bequeathing his expectations to another generation who, in their turn, accepted the white man's burden. But James's mother simply would not cut Grandmamma adrift and let Providence deal with the file and take necessary action, please. She had been brought up on lines which are beautiful in relation to nice old ladies, but were simply indications of a weak mind and incompetent dependence to Grandmamma. Downstairs, in tragic whispers, James had frequently begged her to come right away. She had a fluctuating hundred and fifty a year, and he could earn something. They would have a tremendous time of it. But no, Mildred Fullerton had inherited from some greatly revered ancestor, a Cromwellian probably, a sense of duty. The more trying Grandmamma was, the clearer her path. . . . And what mother with an only son would have left a ship, which by every law of history, medicine, and human experience, was settling comfortably down? She had her duty to James.

Grandmamma had attended to her own affairs for over fifty years. She had an intimate knowledge of shares and bonds and gilt-edged securities. Mr Paterson, the senior partner of the excellent firm of solicitors of that name, was frequently closeted with her. He was an ancient, snuffy little man, with tufts of hair over his eyes, out of his ears and nose, short irascible whiskers, an Aberdonian accent, and an immense respect for Grandmamma. He spoke to her as man to man (of the Stone Age for preference), and acting entirely on her own intuition, and never on his, Grandmamma sold out here and bought in there, and invested the profits in Four Per Cents in order that those poor children, James's father and mother, might not come to the poor-house. She had often told them so.

James's mother was really forty-eight, but that was, of course, ridiculous. Both James and she could afford to laugh at the very idea. For one thing, she looked a safe thirty-five in the morning, and at dinner with a theatre to follow, kindly and romantic persons said how nice it was to see happy young married people together after the War and everything. To keep up the delusion which was far more a reality he called her Mildred.

From the sitting-room window James was able to view the sad gardens of their neighbours. He recalled the gray cat of Mr Groundsell (the eminent painter), walk stiffly over his neglected lawn and grow abruptly rigid at the accustomed spectacle of the black cat of Mr Peto (the great humorist) dozing in its accustomed place on the boundary wall. The daily amazement, emotion, and heart searching of that moment made a difference to the cat of Mr Groundsell. The black cat of Mr Peto took, curiously enough, no notice whatever. Age and decay rested too heavy upon it. One day the sun went in about an hour too soon—a dirty business —and Mr Peto wrote very tenderly about the last moments of the black cat in one of the weeklies, an article included afterwards in his volume of collected fragments. He got ten guineas for the black cat in the weekly (British rights), two hundred dollars (America), and in book form as an individual fragment it worked out at about twelve pounds. There was also a charming little Christmas booklet (with a coloured photograph), especially for cat lovers, that did very nicely. Altogether, that fall in the temperature worked out at roughly a hundred pounds to date. But it hit the gray cat of Mr Groundsell a real knock-out. It waited for the shock that never came. It grew nervy. And then it died. Mr Groundsell, being a portrait painter, was helpless. In a passion he said bitter words to Mr Peto over the boundary wall. He even went so far as to state that

Mr Peto should have replaced his cat since it used a wall common to both properties. And Mr Peto wrote very tenderly about the gray cat in one of the weeklies, an article included afterwards in his volume of collected fragments. His agent, a hard man, cornered the market in cats, and got thirty guineas for the gray cat in the weekly (British rights), five hundred dollars (America), and in book form it worked out at about twelve pounds. There was also a charming little Easter gift book (with lilies and a coloured picture), especially for cat lovers, that did big business. Altogether, that little chat with Mr Groundsell worked out at about two hundred and ten pounds. The little brochure on Mr Groundsell, an imaginary sketch packed with laughter and tears, will be published next week.

It only serves to show how much a garden, any sort of garden, may mean to people if it is taken in the right spirit. To James, their own garden, and the similar and equally forlorn gardens on three sides, presented a spectacle about as cheerful as an estuary when the tide is out. He had not Mr Peto's clear vision, his almost missionary zeal to make the most out of people.

'Let's pull up to the fire and talk, James.'

'My dear Mildred, nothing could be more jolly. It sounds immense. But look at the fire.'

'It's the fault of the grate, dearest.'

'Or is it the coal.'

'I wouldn't advise the poker. Yesterday, when I poked, it died. At once.'

'The Victorians,' sighed James, 'those horrible Victorians. We want log fires three foot by three, a roaring steady flame. The spirit of mirth, the soul of warm and leisured ease. But first of all this house requires one big final fire all to itself. . . . I suppose I'll have to see Grandmamma?'

'Not to-day, dearest. She is expecting some one from

that tribe in the South Seas after tea. It is fifty years since Grandmamma first took an interest in them, and she thought it was time she saw a representative. The missionary appointed by her—a Mister Penny—has accordingly returned in company with the chief.'

'Outrageous!' snorted James. .'Monstrous! The money she has poured into an unknown island of bouncing cannibals nobody has ever heard of! The obstinacy, the Victorian imperialism, the Old Testament autocracy of that woman makes me sick. And here at home, within her immediate daily round, are we—you and I. And Uncle John——'

'Talking of Uncle John——'

'Was I? Oh, yes.'

'He had tea with me yesterday.'

'No?'

His expression changed to one of fond amusement. 'I have not heard a word of him for five years. Is he still the same dear old gas-bag?'

'Worse, dear, worse, only different. But I do not think we should speak of him like that—just now. After all, he is your uncle by marriage, and in these times one should not belittle relatives just because one happens to know better than the Government.'

'I don't understand, Mildred. The Government has enough to answer for without Uncle John.'

'My dear, let me get in a word. Your Uncle John has been offered a most important position, and in these critical times one can only hope for the best and trust in Providence.'

'Uncle John? You don't mean to say?'

'But I do. And they may be right, James, they may be right. Every one is quite carried away by him. Of course we cannot possibly know. But during the War Uncle John closed his business—whatever that was. However, he was positively snatched at to run some

publicity campaign in the Caucasus—I think it was the Caucasus. They say he was wonderful. Then he toured America speaking—you must admit Uncle John has great persuasion.'

James met his mother's eyes and laughed. They were both overtaken by the joy of Uncle John.

'How I love the old humbug,' he said, with affectionate candour.

'I don't believe he is a humbug.'

'All right. An unconscious humbug. A leader of public opinion.'

'And to think of him now. He is to be the new Minister of a brand new Department.'

'Terrific—simply terrific. And only us two know.'

'What do you mean, only us two know?'

'*The real Uncle John.*'

'But do we? Aren't we prejudiced?'

'It doesn't matter. We'd never give him away. Honour amongst relatives. I say "Cheerio, Uncle John," and heaven help the income-tax next year.'

'Don't be so ridiculous, James. No one will be prouder of him than you. Especially now.'

'You have me again.'

'He wants you in his office. He came specially. He has just heard all about you from some one.'

'Me? In a Government office?'

'It would be a good post, dearest. I promised him you'd talk it over to-morrow. I want you to help him. Uncle John has no one who understands him. He is curiously dependent upon people he knows. Rather pathetic, don't you think? I wonder if he'll ever really grow up.'

'I hope not. He wouldn't have the heart to carry on if he did, he's not that sort.'

'That's what your aunt always said. She understood him best. I always cling to the funny side in Uncle

John. I know my limitations. Say you will go, James?'

'I will. But on one condition. I will not enter a Government office as the nephew of Uncle John. I love comedy, but only from the stalls. By the way, what is this new stunt called?'

'The Ministry of Recreation.'

They exchanged a slow, comprehending, but not uncharitable smile.

'Oh, Uncle John!' murmured James with affectionate reproach.

CHAPTER X

OUR poets have hailed the early crocus, the fledgling, and the lamb—they have published at their friends' expense lyrics of plenty and fullness, songs of hope and joy, but few, if any, inspired and moving verses have been devoted to the innocence, the undimmed expectation, the mettled impatience of a new Ministry. It is born without traditions, without an inheritance of debts or discredit. It will go down in due course under a load of abuse and shame, senile, indifferent, shorn of its glory, long since deserted for other official worlds by its early stars. But for a brief time there is an energy, a bustle, a spirit of conquest which permanent civil servants observe with the pensive gaze of knowledge. For awhile the face of the Treasury, like the Almighty's, is veiled, and the Minister chuckles with the Permanent Secretary, and the Permanent Secretary congratulates the Parliamentary Secretary, and the face of the Parliamentary Secretary, who is a lonely creature maintaining a precarious existence amongst stupid and suspicious neighbours, is radiated by a smile as full of pathos as a ray of sunlight piercing the outer rim of a catastrophic cloud.

The Press, having greeted the new Ministry with a cheer as ominous as a huntsman's 'view halloo'—away it goes across a nice piece of open country. With all the zest of youth the run has commenced. And streaming after, hating and despising one another, but for the time being united, come the Houses of Parliament, the Press, the Public, and, of course, the Treasury.

Like all Ministries it was set up within about an hour.

It was conceived by the Right Honourable Mr Winterton at one of those moments in history when either something must happen or some one must—in fact, Mr Winterton was very near the Peerage.

Mr Winterton had indeed never been nearer. Special articles were in type emphasising a national loss which the House of Commons and the public would bear with fortitude when they recalled Mr Winterton's age and long service to the State. Personal appreciations were being written all over the country by rural deans who had been or might have been at the same preparatory school as Mr Winterton, by enthusiastic colleagues in whom the lamp of hope had fluttered distractingly of late, and by the retired spectacle makers, colonels, and 'lovers of justice,' who can be trusted to write about everything and look for neither thanks nor money but only, for the love of Allah, a little space and their names and addresses in full.

So hopeful was the political sky that there was even a photograph of Mr Winterton, with a background of his country house and a group comprising his grandchildren (his daughter had married very young), the family pony, Mrs Winterton (looking about eighty), and underneath —'Where Mr Winterton (now Lord Llandysclyn of Bettysclydd) will spend the evening of his days.' That in itself would have driven him from office.

And in that moment of grave crisis, when the whole country was prepared for the best, Mr Winterton ricochetted with all his old finesse and charm. Once again, laying his foot lightly upon the unsuspecting forms of his colleagues, he prepared to leap for the shoulders of the working man. He was quite suddenly simply overwhelmed by the responsibility of the nation towards the class who worked short hours for high pay and bore their leisure without complaint. It was obvious that something had been taken away which had not been

replaced. The State must provide proper means of employing hours which might lead to pure indolence. The working man had not been taught to make the most of his leisure time. It was a national—an ethical—duty to organise his recreation. That was the germ idea which was revealed to Mr Winterton about 2 a.m. on a morning which cost the country some six million odd but enabled Mr Winterton, like Grandmamma Fullerton, 'to turn the corner.'

Mr Winterton telephoned for Mr Cantlie. After an hour he was reinforced by Mr Burke, the Labour leader, a large, completely silent man with a deserved reputation for saying what he thought. Mr Burke was supported an hour later by Mr Roderick of Roderick's 'Tak' a Drap Glen Urquhart,' a name blown wherever the English tongue is heard.

Mr Winterton spoke for six hours without repeating himself. He disclaimed any personal responsibility for a scheme which he knew was very near to the hearts of all three gentlemen, and which one, if not two, had touched upon in confidence more than once. He wanted it to be clearly understood that the country would know when the hour struck, and not before, to whom recognition was due. There was no doubt in his mind regarding how the country would act. He saw the time coming when the names of some present would be household names. His might or might not be included. Time would proclaim its verdict. The People would not be deceived. . . . At these ominous words the faces of all three gentlemen blenched with prophetic vision. . . .

Mr Winterton, warming to the subject, and having left no uncertainty upon a point which might affect some of them more nearly than others in a future of grave uncertainty, hastened to treat in greater detail the scope, the constructive idealism, the commercial, financial, and political advantages of what he could not but feel (and

feel very deeply) would go far to unite the various classes of society, soothe the spirit of unrest, and restore a Merrie England to these distracted shores. . . .

In other words it would give the Government a breather.

Richard Pennington came in rather later, when the heavy guns had cleared away the barbed wire of the infuriated opposition, who have ever lacked poetry and sweet reasonableness, and are the carping antagonists of progress, the welfare of the People, not to speak of Mr Winterton. Richard Pennington had a heart-to-heart talk with Mr Cantlie, and the discovery of John Humbleford was discussed with startling candour and realism. There again no one quite knew who was to be held responsible, and Mr Winterton, whom the inner circle suspected in the twilight of former melancholy episodes, maintained and accentuated an attitude of official neutrality, tempered with vigilance as became a seasoned voyager in dirty weather.

Richard Pennington came away from Mr Cantlie somewhat shaken. He reappeared in Whitehall, despatch case in hand, and passed with thoughtful steps towards the river where the latest Ministry was taking precarious root in the offices of a Department recently shut down amidst a chorus of contumely and painful revelations of princely expenditure. He went slowly up the steps littered with Admiralty tables, belonging to the discredited Ministry, going out, and Admiralty tables, of the splendid new Ministry, moving in. An official of the Office of Works, whose duty it was to see that every article of furniture should be removed before it was reinstated, was listening with composure to the excited comments of the Establishment Officer as he busily spread out on tables, instantly conveyed away, plans of rooms with the essential articles of furniture.

'Unless Mr Smith has a salary of £500 a year he

cannot have a desk with drawers,' said the representative of the Office of Works with finality.

'But Mr Smith is a voluntary worker. He is the well-known Mr Smith, the writer on national pastimes. What's more, he says his bronchitis demands a carpet.'

'A carpet?' echoed the Office of Works in a scandalised voice. 'No, no! A carpet starts at seven-fifty. Heads of departments sometimes, assistant secretaries always, the permanent secretary, the parliamentary secretary, the Minister. If you want a carpet for Mr Smith you must communicate with the Treasury. But I doubt if they would authorise it. They have taken a very strong line on carpets recently. A rug, perhaps—you can hardly hope for more. And a rug would form a dangerous precedent.'

'Then there is Miss Pennington. She says she must have a cabinet for files, the large size, with——'

'What is her official grading?' asked the Office of Works sharply.

'Her duties are secretarial.'

'Second grade,' murmured the Office of Works, 'let her apply through the head of the Women Clerks Department. It will, of course, go no farther.'

'Mr Whisperley particularly wants her to have a cupboard.'

'It is not sanctioned,' considered the Office of Works, 'but if Mr Whisperley expresses a *strong desire through official channels*——'

It was at once obvious that the shadow of the Treasury was brooding as always over the actions and reactions of human frailty.

Richard Pennington passed on. He encountered Mrs Perrott, the head of the stenographers' room, an immense mournful person with the necessary demeanour and qualifications of a lion-tamer. Richard Pennington had known Mrs Perrott in a similar capacity in the Ministry

of Crises. They conferred together a moment in official undertones, Richard Pennington smilingly reminiscent, Mrs Perrott prepared, as always, to do her best, and as full of buoyancy and snap about it all as an Abbey Theatre drama.

'Office of Works late again, of course. Have you seen any of our old friends, Mrs Perrott? All scattered now, I suppose?'

It will be recalled that the public demanded with shouts of opprobrium that of the Ministry of Crises all and sundry should be flung into the ways of honest toil. Words such as 'limpets,' 'barnacles,' 'leeches,' stared every householder in the face at breakfast. But no.

'*Absorbed*, Mr Pennington, *absorbed*. Mr Clark is over the registry here.' Richard Pennington nodded. Mr Clark could always be relied upon to lose and take the blame for mislaying (official papers are never lost) files of acute public interest. 'Mr Pettigrew is coming back as an Assistant Secretary. . . .'

But there were as always the skeletons in the cupboard. There is no new Department which does not carry one or two stowaways in the hold. Richard Pennington softened, it may be, by that knowledge that age comes to all, had bowed his acquiescence to the attachment of two elderly gentlemen both saddened by calamitous official debâcles in other fields to the higher advisory staff of the Ministry. It was pointed out that nothing could have been sweeter than the resignation in both senses of these ancient persons, and it was only felt a little tactless of them, in view of their mutual acceptance of the K.B.E., not to go a step farther and spend the twilight of their days amidst domestic pleasaunces. Or, in language too brutal for departmental decorum, pocket their knighthood and bung off. But they wouldn't. They actually believed, so mysterious are the inner perambulations of the human mind, that they had been selected for a high

distinction for eminent services rendered. They persisted in hanging about. Conferences were called to discuss a situation that was almost unprecedented. After grave deliberation it was decided to ask the new Ministry of Recreation to give them a room. It was moved it should have a carpet and a telephone. 'Give them each a telephone,' breathed a Controller, so high did feeling run.

And so Sir William Holdback and Sir Cyrus Query came together and occupied a quiet and comfortable room together somewhere at the top of the building. They arrived rather busily at ten, and Sir William brought his luncheon with him. As they were allowed a special girl messenger for their particular requirements, it was quite easy for the soup to be heated, the eggs boiled, and everything in order as Sir William liked.

They sat, these two amiable high officials, facing each other at their desks, and by the side of each was a telephone. Sir William was one of those large, clean-shaven, voluminous officials with a tremendous manner and a general air of taking tea on the Terrace with Lady ——. His address was courteous, but on the grand scale. Even in his remote habitation he set out and was instantly successful in impressing the girl messenger.

Sir Cyrus cultivated the negligent happy-go-lucky official, and now that he could startle and abash people by remarking that he was a knight, he was rapidly acquiring the dejected demeanour and deliberate smell of a vagrant. He was amused by the pretentious and grand ways of Sir William, knowing, as every one knew, how very fortunate Sir William had been. And Sir William, regarding the shrivelled figure of Sir Cyrus with his disheartened moustache, his soiled soft collar, and his persistent sniffing, thought how fortunate it was the poor old boy did not know the real reason for that K.B.E.

And so these two ancient persons faced each other daily and sought by every artifice to convince each other

of the enormous part they each had taken in official life. They had nothing to do. And yet before each gentleman were always certain letters or whatnot, usually directed on to them by mistake, and occasionally, for this is a Christian land, the Permanent Secretary would run up and ask their advice upon a point already satisfactorily settled. Their excitement then was so high, their sense of crisis so strong, that he would slip away, leaving them in conference. And up there, forgotten, side-tracked, oblivious to the passing hours, Holdback would start up and say, 'But, Sir Cyrus—I question that,' and Query, in his mincing, supercilious falsetto, would reply, 'I wonder, Sir William, if you will question it when I have an opportunity of formulating my views without interruption.'

'Please continue, Sir Cyrus.'

'Thank you, Sir William.'

And sometimes the telephone rang. That was a great, a terrific moment. It might, you understand, be for either Holdback or Query, owing to the stupidity of the exchange, who never fully grasped the existence of either. But usually it was for some one else.

There were times when Sir William's call was received by Sir Cyrus. That was always a great moment. Especially if the voice was that of a lady.

'Sir William—yes—just a moment. I am Sir Cyrus Query, but Sir William is in the room. No, please wait a moment—Sir William——'

Sir Cyrus would then rise and hand over the receiver to Sir William, who would make a great business of being rung up in office hours, and laugh very loudly with an eye on Sir Cyrus and look as though he was lunching on the Terrace as well. . . .

Now, these old K.B.E.'s have no part in this narrative, just as they had no official place in the Ministry of Recreation. They are mentioned as an act of grace.

Some day the Ministry will leave with downcast eyes that palatial building where Sir Cyrus sits opposite Sir William, it will dissolve without thought for aught but those new departments which have taken the religious significance of sanctuary in our rough island story. To them in that hour will the Higher and the Lower Grades flee, and great will be the discomfiture and many will be compelled to work in that day.

But it is quite likely no one will trouble to tell Hold-back and Query. The lift will be going down not up, and they live very high indeed, so high that Sir William's canary, which he has hung by the window, can send its minute carol into a friendly sky. They will sit up there opposite each other until the great silence falls beneath their feet, and even then they will remain. There will be nothing of the Roman sentinel about them—it is questionable if they will be hung at the Academy. But how shocking—how poignant, if in some distant era they are found still opposite one another, with dusty telephone and threadbare clothes, with their imaginary letters, and repeating with timeless and majestic tenacity their faint 'Sir William' and their tremulous 'Sir Cyrus.'

Mr Pennington passed on.

In every room the same excited little groups, the same bursts of strident laughter, and always the depressed omniscient faces of the Office of Works' men who establish Ministries and, departing awhile, return in the process of time, or it may be only presently, and perform the last sad offices. To them a Minister is a lounge chair, a Permanent Secretary a lounge chair (extra finish), and an Establishment Officer a lounge chair (cushioned in durable leather, superb finish and superfine quality).

Mr Pennington opened the door of his room. Upon the outside was a large sheet of stiff white paper, 'The

Secretary. Private. (Inquiries next door).' Inside, a man was laying a carpet, and Miss Raikes, his secretary, was, with the aid of his personal typist, a large red-faced girl, arranging his desk.

'The Minister rang up, Mr Pennington.'

'Yes?'

'He said might he bring his Personal Assistant to dinner?'

'Certainly. Did you say so?'

'I thought you would raise no objection.'

'Thank you.'

Miss Raikes had been with Mr Pennington long enough to become indispensable. Behind every higher official, prompting, reminding, excusing, explaining, there is a Miss Raikes. Were any person so reckless, so vile, and so unprincipled as to kidnap at one sweep all the Miss Raikes's the Government would fall in a week.

Miss Raikes was minute, middle-aged, and appeared to lack nourishment. Her manner was sharp, and her insight into the real motive underlying any official minute, or visitor, or letter, keen and unchristian. She did not ignore Mr Pennington. She was not like those intensely brilliant young secretaries who cannot be content with hastening their Chief's retirement, but get him the K.B.E. (Civilian) as well. She ground Mr Pennington's axe all the time. She wrote his drafts for official explanations, his drafts for Ministerial expectations, his drafts for Parliamentary evasions. Her minutes brought tears to the tired eyes of permanent civil servants embarrassed by temporary officials 'with business training,' and eager voluntary workers even worse. She wrote with that note of divine detachment which lifts a minute above a personal reprimand into an atmosphere of abstract regret. And her memoranda were models of clarity, unity, and indifference. They revealed a depth of cunning, resource, and policy in

Mr Pennington which his amiable presence at conferences might otherwise have dissipated.

Richard Pennington stood by the window and looked down upon the river, flowing smoothly beneath an autumn sunset. In the street below the pantechnicons of the Office of Works were rumbling like tumbrils towards Whitehall. The pavement was black with the hurrying forms of clerks and typists. Already the charwomen, that sombre race who hover with pails outside the doors of the occupied, and speak with husky relish of murders, of strikes, and fatal ailments, were grouped about the sign book.

Mr Pennington wished Miss Raikes good-night and passed out. It was half-past five and the new Minister, was dining with him at seven-thirty. He had heard enough about Mr Humbleford to await the next few hours with extreme perturbation.

CHAPTER XI

I

RICHARD PENNINGTON stood at the corner of Victoria Street for bus No. 11. Had he walked to the club as usual he would have waited (one dare not promise more) for No. 19, and (perhaps) reached his house in time. But he was disinclined to listen to Walters upon the political situation. Walters was deaf, dogmatic, and old. He menaced the smoking-room from the fireplace in a voice and manner extraordinarily like George Graves. Richard Pennington simply did not feel up to Walters. Therefore he waited for bus No. 11, and while he waited he drew comfort from the thought of a warm fire in the library.

Richard Pennington had come to live in that state of impressive detachment tempered with infinite tact and poise which lesser men, burdened with insufficient means, domestic adjustments, and unstable health, can only dimly estimate. He had, early in life, hardened himself against the outer world by his study of Assyrian antiquities. For many years he had been busy on a monumental book which would be published very shortly. His private income had always been adequate. He enjoyed excellent health, which he had always husbanded with sensible precaution. He was not married. It was therefore difficult for Richard Pennington to be either profoundly elated (if only for a moment) or profoundly depressed. His temperament was equable, and his disposition kindly so long as his little comforts and habits were not jarred.

And even while he stood upon the edge of the pavement squinting into the dusk for a No. 11 bus, a crisis was rushing upon him with terrific and unexampled ferocity, not the slow accumulated doom of tragic circumstance, but a tornado without dignity or art, or a sense of propriety. Had Richard Pennington been run over by the bus the anti-climax could not have been more out of keeping with his deserts or his sense of decorum. There are, indeed, times when everything works together for evil, not on the grand scale which has its compensations, but with a flavour of the comic, which is intolerable.

Richard Pennington, after a wait both anxious, and at the last formidable rush, extremely critical, mounted a bus and occupied the front seat top, which in its bitter exposure, its sense of adventure, its fine pathos, must surely, sooner or later, appeal to the moist gaze of Mr Jerome K. Jerome. Richard Pennington shivered with the raw vigour of that autumn night. His hands were chilled, his nose was chilled. As they rushed from Victoria into the dark fastnesses of Buckingham Palace Road the tears gleamed in a face of stone. He was, as they swung round the corner by the bridge, no better than a dumb figure-head staring with mournful insistence from the bow of a belated merchantman. And owing to the drizzle peculiar to the left-hand corner of Lower Sloane Street, a lady immediately behind him prodded his back with the sharp ferrule of an umbrella at every jolt of the bus. It was not actually painful but it did no help. Overtaken by that spirit of unrest so noticeable everywhere to-day, Richard Pennington got off and set out into the night. He headed for the Embankment and his determination to get home grew and grew. It nearly blinded him at those familiar interludes on such a pilgrimage when the traveller, casting his weary eyes downwards, gets a brief vision of somebody else's enormous

temporary cook conducting a dish of scones from the oven. The last half-hour had been like a chapter of one of our grave younger authors striking, rather deliberately, the Russian note. Not, that is, in any way tragic, nor on the other hand simply funny, but somewhere between the two, and on the whole meaningless and boring.

'Ah!' sighed Richard Pennington with extraordinary relief, and pushed his latchkey into the door of his dear little flat overlooking the river. He banged the door, as it were, upon the gross inconsequence and indignity of life.

He turned to face Pandora.

She was simply dressed in a black evening-gown and wore a rope of pearls round her throat.

'I've come, Uncle Dick,' she said, with the cloudless innocence of extreme youth.

Behind her he caught sight of Blinkhorn moving discreetly about—as it were at home.

II

'I've got you a nice cup of tea,' said Pandora, taking his arm and giving it a little affectionate squeeze. 'Poor, cold Uncle Dick.'

'Pandora . . . This is unexpected. Dear me, am I so late, then? Did you come early?'

These futile wrigglings, this assumption of the senility of extreme old age availed him nothing.

In the small draught-proof library where Richard Pennington worked and read and gazed reflectively over the river, or into the companionable fire, there was sufficient evidence to disconcert, if no more. There were flowers—an immense bowl of them—on the window ledge, a large cushion was on the rug before the fire just as though a person or a cat had lain there not so long

ago—a most unusual proceeding. Richard Pennington could not recall a single occasion upon which he, for instance . . . But there again the cushion had probably fallen and rolled. And as he satisfied himself upon this point he could not refrain from uttering a sharp and outraged cry. It rang out in that place as one might imagine the mournful scream of a wounded elephant would haunt the dim aisles of its domestic wilds.

'Uncle Dick, is it your heart?'

'*My Virgil, on the floor.*'

He drooped and stooped, and gathered up a handsome, a distinguished, a reproachful volume with one page crumpled and the binding strained.

'Look,' he cried. 'Oh——'

'Oh,' echoed Pandora, 'and if it hadn't looked like a book to read I wouldn't have pulled it out.'

'This was a prize,' wailed Richard Pennington. 'See!'

He spoke true words borne out on the inside of the cover. It said so in Latin.

'I don't follow all of it,' admitted Pandora, 'but it's a real song and dance, isn't it?'

Her uncle felt too wounded to reply. He turned away, and returning the book stood prepared for anything.

He was aware of a new smell in the room—an elusive conference of flowers and scent—a feminine smell. He sniffed it as writers of sterling imagination assert the war horse sniffs the field of battle.

'I have been waiting for ages,' said Pandora reprovingly 'I sent the tea down once. Look—hot muffins. Mrs Webster does cook well, doesn't she?'

Richard Pennington accepted a cup of tea. He was prudent enough to say nothing further until he knew the worst. He was already aware that he must surely have sprung to ridiculous conclusions. But the reference to Mrs Webster was curious. Almost as though Pandora . . . Absurd, of course . . .

'Now you carry on with your tea, uncle, and I'll tell you all about it. Muffin! No. I ate three before you came. Do you mind if I sit on the floor? Nice Uncle Dick——' She stopped abruptly and regarded him with interested, inscrutable eyes.

'Yes,' he said uneasily.

'When Blink and I reached London——'

'Blink?'

'Blinkhorn, Uncle Dick. But better not drop to Blink until you know him better. He is very touchy about that sort of thing.'

'As I see no reason why I should know him any better in the future than in the past you need not trouble your head, Pandora.'

His laboured words died away. He regarded her closely. But Pandora only smiled her innocent charming smile.

'Anyway,' she said with inconsequence, 'we arrived, and, as I said to Blink when you and Mr Whisperley went off, "What do we do next?" He was wondering too. We lunched over it at the Carlton Grill. Amongst all the usual faces there the melancholy isolation of Blink, with his remote air and studied resemblance to his last master, Lord Rupert Polperro, made a difference. We decided to do a round of house agents. We wanted a nice little furnished flat with four main rooms; one for me, one for visitors, one for Blink, and a sitting-room. It must be near the Ministry and overlooking the river——'

For some obscure reason Richard Pennington started and frowned vaguely.

'It must have electric light,' Pandora screwed round her head and stared rapturously at an ântique electric reading lamp, 'a nice lot of books for winter evenings, and be in Chelsea. I have always longed to live in Chelsea.'

'Too low,' cautioned Richard Pennington, rallying. 'We must have an expedition to Hampstead. Bracing air——'

'We rushed into a taxi,' resumed Pandora, without looking up, 'and called at one agent after another. They all took full particulars and they all said if they could hear of such a flat they could let it to thousands of clients over and over again. Apparently our tastes are catholic. At four-thirty Blink and I landed here, tired, discouraged, and you know the rest, you *dear* Uncle Dick,' concluded Pandora, laying one hand on his knee.

'Mrs Webster gave you tea?' he asked faintly. 'I'm glad.'

'*And told us.*'

'Told you?'

'All about it. Blink got it all downstairs. They simply adore each other. Nothing could be more fortunate. Mrs Webster said how nicely you had spoken of me, and that when she asked if I was coming to look after you, you had said—what, exactly, did you say, Uncle Dick?'

'I have no recollection of saying anything,' remarked Richard Pennington, deeply moved.

'Then it was one of your dear meaning looks,' murmured Pandora softly, 'and to take Blink too! I call it too sweet of you. He is ironing your trousers already, and when we have little official dinners he'll wait, and Mrs Webster says she's always longed for *a man* in the house—a butler, of course, not you, Uncle Dick,' added Pandora hastily.

Richard Pennington rallied. He left his chair, and moving over to a bookcase, stared hard at Prescott's *Conquest of Mexico*. He had never felt more like Montezuma in his life.

'I need not say, my dear Pandora, how—how surprised I was to find you here. I'm afraid Mrs Webster acted with just a little precipitation. I recall I said to

her that your mother was prepared to lose you, but that she wanted you to have a little experience on your own, so to speak. She spared Blinkhorn for that purpose. She, indeed, would have poured cold water upon your staying with me, so I knew it was worse than useless to press it. And I have no doubt you would prefer to be free, to ask'in your friends, to go to the theatre. Nothing could be jollier. But to live with an old fogey like me —oh, dear——' chuckled Richard Pennington, and stared with an eye of marble at Prescott's massive binding.

Pandora came noiselessly across the room and slipped her arm through his.

'It's all right about mother,' she said quietly.

The sentiment of the scene was beyond Richard Pennington. He had not been brought up in the Dickens' school. To him the room had grown suddenly arctic.

'I wired mother,' went on Pandora. 'I waited, and when you did not come, I wired.'

'Your mother will never consent,' he said hotly. 'I must telephone at once.'

'You are too good, Uncle Dick. How could I ever have thought you were an Uncle Richard? Supposing she refuses—shall we—shall we fight it out? Here——'

'No,' said Richard Pennington, with splendid decision. 'Your mother's wishes must be carried out. Implicitly. I have a duty to your father, and you are his only daughter. Your mother will insist, and insist rightly, that you take a flat with Blinkhorn. What does it matter,' he added, brightening, 'you will be near. I can be constantly running in. And——'

There was a long, ominous ring at the front-door bell.

'A telegram,' whispered Pandora excitedly. 'Mother's reply.'

'I'll open it,' said Richard Pennington quickly, but Pandora was before him.

In the silence of the empty room he awaited the

verdict. He rested his faith upon the decency, the morality, the finer promptings of a mother's heart. He was suddenly aware Pandora was waving a telegram under his stricken eyes.

It was wonderfully lucid.

'How like you dear Richard to steal our little Pandora. Nothing has so relieved her lonely mother.'

'Shall I decant the wine, sir?' inquired the memorable voice of Blinkhorn in the open doorway.

With a shudder Richard Pennington knew the citadel was taken with hardly a shot exchanged.

CHAPTER XII

I

ANDREW WHISPERLEY was the first to arrive. To his intense gratification quite unforseen opportunities for exercising his abrupt manner were afforded him. Strangers used to ask with genuine curiosity why Mr Whisperley was so rude. At which the Whisperley party who struggled manfully in his wake spoke gravely of *discipline*, and added with reflective discourtesy that some people had more leisure to be agreeable than others. But none of these ever attained the peculiar genius of Mr Whisperley's disturbing incivility. They were simply rude in a kind of arctic official fashion. Andrew Whisperley was an artist in violence. He disarmed precautions by intervals of civilised amenities.

He went with his lambs to the slaughter. Then without a sign, without joy or anger, he devoured them: it is given to few to crush the rudiments of hospitality so supremely. He carried his denial of surprise to a fine point. His habit of accepting persons, files, crises, at all times and places without the approved indications of amazement, dismay, or panic, chilled the blood. A little drama is one of the perquisites of life.

Andrew Whisperley recognised Blinkhorn at a glance. Moreover, Blinkhorn offered Andrew Whisperley a faint smile. It conveyed that, in Blinkhorn's mind, the midnight conference in Sussex and the memorable journey on a frosty morning, like a voyage to the Pole, served as a bond between human men. Surely it was

the meaning of democracy. He was wrong. He also anticipated that Mr Whisperley, seeing him with a white shirt, and attending quite as a matter of course to his calling in a strange house, would express a natural emotion. He was quite wrong.

Andrew Whisperley conveyed with severity that he remembered Blinkhorn perfectly well, handed him his hat and coat and waited. He then followed him upstairs and entered the library. The experience was new to Blinkhorn. If the glass of Mr Whisperley was drained it was most unlikely that it would be replenished. Further than that he did not at present see his way. With sombre eyes he went heavily down to the cellar where Mr Pennington kept his wine. There was not much, but what there was caused him considerable uneasiness.

Pandora faced Andrew Whisperley in the childish expectation that he would behave himself. She had not entered upon her official duties. She was—so unexpectedly—his hostess upon an occasion when affability was surely the keynote—affability banked with enthusiasm.

It was Andrew Whisperley's moment.

'I secured you an Admiralty table,' he said, shaking hands with his eyes on the clock. Then, walking straight on, he warmed himself at the fire and stared with a blank indifference at the books. That was all.

At which Pandora set out on the path trodden by all persons associated with Andrew Whisperley whether they be clever or foolish. She decided to snub him into common courtesy. She felt that this kind of thing must be nipped. The swiftness of the assault had, in fact, disorganised her so far as to reduce her to an ordinary commonplace creature moved by recognised reactions. It was humbling—for Pandora was none of these—but there it was. Unconsciously Andrew Whisperley saved

her from disaster. He reverted to his second line of attack. He laughed—a pleasant, musical note—displaying his strong white teeth, an infectious, disarming laugh, and made quite good derisive fun of the chaos of their room. At such unexpected moments strangers to Andrew Whisperley saw no reason to refrain from echoing his cordial amusement. They joined with him. They remembered other little playful episodes in their own altogether undistinguished and contemptible lives. And suddenly they were aware of a chill in the atmosphere, an isolation, a loss of words. They realised that Mr Whisperley was staring over their heads with grim intensity—that he had even turned his back, or was evidencing signs of alarming impatience. Frequently, in the Ministry, he would simply interrupt with an official question, follow it by an official reprimand, and take off the telephone receiver. There are few acts so final as the removal of a receiver.

He concluded his anecdote, and shutting off his smile, snapped his mouth, and glared at the ceiling. He was ready.

Pandora said nothing.

Somewhere in Andrew Whisperley's head a brain cell took action. His gaze left the ceiling. It concentrated on Pandora. A trifle uneasy, he permitted himself what might result in an interchange of glances, an unbending.

Pandora continued to say nothing. She simply regarded him with an unfathomable intensity, made the more disturbing by his intuition that she might not be thinking of him at all. Revolted by such an absurd idea Andrew Whisperley retraced his steps. He had made a joke—the sort of thing anybody might do. Was Pandora stupid or did she disapprove of something or what? She certainly was not stupid, nor had she the look of a person who gets shocked. She was simply remote as though she was not called upon to show

animation. *Like a higher official.* That was it. Absurd, of course, but there it was. He recalled something Pennington had said about her remarkable efficiency in some new department or other. The look was unmistakable. It is the bonus of every higher official. It was his own look, only infinitely finer, more inaccessible, almost Oriental. He knew with a sense of despair that he would never reach that look. Those who carried it were Cabinet Ministers, Judges, Bishops, Permanent Secretaries . . . The door had opened.

'Mr Cantlie,' announced Blinkhorn, ignoring Andrew Whisperley.

And to Andrew Whisperley, mortified by this preposterous idea, the warm greeting of Mr Cantlie, a Cabinet Minister, and Pandora was unmistakable. Pandora introduced him to Cantlie pleasantly enough, but quite in the recognised fashion when the large dogs wag their tails to the small, and then extending one slender hand to catch the firelight, spoke the proper small talk for an eminent personage. She and Blinkhorn had studied him together in various social guide-books of reference. But Andrew Whisperley had no small talk. He wished Richard Pennington would have the common decency to appear.

Downstairs Blinkhorn was assisting Mr E. S. Penfold to remove his fur coat. The famous newspaper proprietor and editor was Blinkhorn's highest deity. It was Penfold whom the Empire should thank for winning the War. It was Penfold who demanded this and that and got it, who warned Ministers, and admonished strikers, who . . .

And here, standing in the hall, struggling out of his coat, was the man himself, and not much to look at either. Rather like one of those British-born old waiters in a city chop house, who answer with tireless celerity to howls of 'George' or 'William'—a small, indifferently

shaven man with the heavy florid face which is the cross so many total abstainers are called upon to bear.

Richard Pennington, late and rather flustered, appeared at the top of the stairs, and drawing Mr Penfold aside conferred with him in low undertones. The name of Humbleford was mentioned, and Blinkhorn stated, when the episode developed interest, that Mr Penfold looked 'guarded,' neither hostile nor indifferent —but '*guarded*.' It is probable Blinkhorn was right.

There was a splendid peal at the door. Instantly Richard Pennington and E. S. Penfold looked down the stairs. They stood there, a very tall and a very small man, gazing with grave patience and composure towards the door. Blinkhorn, aware that this was a moment in history, opened it with a flourish.

'Mr Pennington,' said an immense man under a crush hat. Blinkhorn was struck by the sonorous splendour of the inquiry. It reminded him, he often said afterwards, of a great actor (he was not particular which) coming on the stage for a big curtain scene. All those who heard John Humbleford at the height of his fame will understand. Gentlemen paid to write 'specials' took Humbleford's voice in their stride. Some simply called it 'an organ' and rested on their oars. The expression meant and covered about as much as calling it a trombone or a triangle. Others recalled a torrent, or a storm. Nothing could be vaguer. Nothing could so despicably avoid the responsibility, the adequacy of prose. The only possible, the only true comparison is not with ship's bells, or motor horns, or maroons, but with the immortal voices of the past. It has never been denied that John Humbleford possessed to a quite remarkable degree the persuasive lower register of Brigham Young inspired and aflame with the resonant optimism of Cæsar Borgia.

In the hall, John Humbleford, indefatigably assisted by James Fullerton and Blinkhorn, toiled out of his

coat, and was presently tramping like a sergeant of police upstairs. Behind came his assistant.

Pandora had shaken hands with Mr Penfold, who was exchanging distant civilities with Mr Cantlie when Blinkhorn announced the Minister. They all turned towards the door. There was a pause, sufficiently long to be appreciable, and suddenly the enormous presence of John Humbleford blotted out the hall.

When an audience caught its first vision of John Humbleford climbing, it might be, the steps of a platform at a meeting of national indignation, it cheered instinctively. It had received the lean and suspicious figures of preceding eminent persons with courtesy and tepid recognition. They were alien to the English tradition —furtive, if essential, Jews, rugged, hairy Scotsmen, insinuating Welsh. But at the splendid avoirdupois of Humbleford, at his enormous bland face, ruddy as a Wiltshire squire's, the place rose to its feet and roared its approval. One of the decisive moments in his career, from which he never looked back, had been the collapse of a platform chair on the eve of a critical election.

Upon that room, with its official undertone, its half lights, a strong current of sea air seemed to hurtle. The personality of Richard Pennington introducing Pandora was obscured, the attendant figures of Cantlie, Penfold, and Whisperley overwhelmed.

'Miss Pennington,' said the Minister, in his slow, resonant monotone, 'allow me to introduce you to Mr Fullerton. This young gentleman is older than he looks. I believe in him. I may be wrong. I want you to believe that I am right.'

That was the Humbleford note, half whimsical, half persuasive.

Pandora was overcome. The face of James was masked. He shook hands and passed on.

'We tried to get a taxi,' resumed John Humbleford,

and instantly the room was hushed. 'We failed.' Had he lost his wife the profound effect of that utterance could not have been more evident. 'I am afraid we are very late. I know—we all know—how one should never be late for dinner——' In the pause Cantlie exchanged a smile with Penfold. 'There is a story I heard in Oregon of a certain darkie who was late. I heard John P. Rooter tell it at his farewell dinner. There was not a dry eye when he sat down.'

Standing before the fire, his large, clumsy hands extended, his eyes holding them all, John Humbleford repeated the anecdote. Looking back on it afterwards, it seemed thin enough even for John P. Rooter and the distended horizon of a farewell banquet. At the time, under Humbleford's amazing presence, it made even Penfold feel a better man.

'Dinner,' announced Blinkhorn, without reference to Andrew Whisperley, 'is served.'

They all moved rather self-consciously towards the door.

II

It went on downstairs. Mr Cantlie rallied a little over the fish and threw out a few snappy comments to Penfold. James Fullerton, abstracted, speechless, knew afar off that Whisperley had spoken. But all were riveted on Humbleford. His vast form towered at the end of the table. Pandora sat upon his left. She watched him with an intensity that might have caused a lesser man to feel elated or shy. The Minister was neither. He did not eat or drink. He punctuated his monologue with a fork, and turned a face of child-like expectation this way and that, including them all, seeking their opinions, confirming their agreement before it was uttered.

And especially John Humbleford levelled his attack on E. S. Penfold, who sat, as always, with veiled but conscious eyes and the flaming enthusiasm of an elderly mandarin hearing the call to the Gospel in a language he does not understand. It was Penfold's misfortune to listen to the biggest ideas in the history of civilisation about four times a day. His passion for Utopia was blunted, but his sense of news never slumbered. He was taking it all in.

Mr Cantlie, eating his savoury with gentility, was also suffering no heart acceleration, but he was no longer anxious about John Humbleford. In his soul was a great peace. Winterton had delivered the goods all right. *Humbleford would do.* He was unbelievable but he was the man. He took his hoops without a crack of the whip.

Andrew Whisperley, being in the Treasury, moved, like the Office of Works, above Ministers and their brief sporadic activities. Humbleford caused him neither amusement nor dismay. As a little boy upon his first visit to the Zoo, Andrew Whisperley had accepted the hippopotamus without comment.

Richard Pennington had moved all his life in official back-waters where the current runs strongly but on the bedrock. At home, and in the departments of State, he clung to the Athenian horizon—a kind of Foreign Office sense of the permanence and decorum of things. He looked at Pandora and John Humbleford as a loyal and right-minded skipper might regard employers who are set upon the lawless wrecking of his ship. He had never been optimistic about Humbleford, but he was forced to view with grave concern the unfolding of the future. He even, upon the lingering disappearance of Blinkhorn, who was moved to cheer loudly more than once at the termination of one of the Minister's frequent perorations, ventured, delicately, of course, and as a loyal colleague

upon the eve of a tremendous venture, to throw out a little (in no way critical) comment. Fingering his glass and smiling down his nose Richard Pennington remarked:

'Professor Strachan has recently remarked that recreation, properly administered, can be regarded with —er—justification and approval as one of the counter forces in the overstrain of modern life.'

'Make a note of that name, please,' broke in the Minister, turning to James, 'that's the man for us. Wire him first thing in the morning. Say: "Will you accept post Director-General of University Propaganda Great Britain.—Humbleford." Thank you, Pennington, that's the kind of man we want.'

'A moment, please,' cried Richard Pennington, in a flutter.

'And, Fullerton, have that sentence put into type on a white placard with red lettering. It should hang—it *shall* hang—in every church, theatre, cinema hall, and over every bedstead where the English tongue is heard. Now we're beginning to move, gentlemen, and there are a few points I would like to throw on the table. Take them up, challenge them, chew them up if you can. I welcome criticism. The man who cannot take criticism knows he is not strong enough.'

'May I,' interpolated Richard Pennington, whose sole mention of Professor Strachan was to disagree, courteously of course, but absolutely with the philosophical and historical hypotheses upon which the remark was presumably based, unless of course it was simply an ebullition from the High Table of a certain college at a certain university from which such imbecilities drop like the gentle rain from heaven. Richard Pennington had desired, after his own scholarly fashion, to drag in the miserable Professor Strachan (whom he despised intellectually and personally), and then with expressions

of respect and admiration worthy of a fellow worker in Assyriology, prove him little better than a congenital idiot. He had now, as a further horrible vision of the future, every reason to know that Professor Strachan would leap at such an opportunity to accept an official position ensuring a gratifying channel of self-advertisement and the certainty of a knighthood to convince the reading public ever afterwards of his European reputation as a profound thinker. Unless he could get in a word . . .

But the Minister was no longer merely on fire. He was in a blaze. He no longer heard the plaintive wail of Richard Pennington. Henceforth, whatever people might say to the contrary, however much they might malign his Permanent Secretary as 'loyal but cautious,' he knew him as a man who saw *Big*—a man with a *knock-out punch*.

'Pennington sees it—you see it—I see it,' said John Humbleford, and then, after a pause, 'Gentlemen, what do we see?'

There was shared in the minds of that curious group a vision beyond the adequacy of speech.

'It is a great subject. It took Mr Winterton ten hours close talk to get at grips with it. But he made it *live*. Let me put it to you as I see it. Concisely. Briefly. The history of industrial progress is one of machinery, long hours, low wages, and miserable housing. Toil—unending toil—and again toil. The mind of the nation warped, the physique of the nation lowered, the spiritual enlightenment of the nation dimmed. Am I right or am I wrong?'

E. S. Penfold lowered his head. There was a certain illustrated Sunday paper could do with any amount of stuff like this. Sermons of the people, by the people, for the people, so long as they implore them to admire themselves, are quite the rage. They have brought

preaching—often a discredited and chilling business—into a place of respect and acknowledgment.

Mr Cantlie had often wondered how John Humbleford, as an unknown candidate, had simply swept the board. Now he knew.

Andrew Whisperley glared at John Humbleford without recognition, being a Treasury official, and therefore ignorant of all national questions.

James Fullerton exchanged a glance with Pandora. But Pandora, flushed, breathing quickly, was lost to the sceptical world. She was entering another kingdom where the Humblefords ride along the milky way to the stars.

And then, in that dramatic silence, the low, impassioned voice of Pandora fell on her uncle's ears with a clang of doom. Pandora was strongly moved. She was in a glow at the enormous possibilities of it all. She was accustomed to speaking, and she did herself proud. She made, with charming diffidence, suggestions, some of which would have put an American publicity man in Fifth Avenue, and any one enough, in Richard Pennington's belief, to strangle a Ministry at birth. And all the time, like a benignant idol, the Minister ducked his head and smiled and said, 'Good—great—genius,' and simmered for more ornate superlatives. They threw the ball one to the other faster and faster. And around them listening with immutable faces, sat Mr Cantlie, E. S. Penfold, Andrew Whisperley, James Fullerton, a kind of Greek chorus with the figure of Richard Pennington an unwilling tragi-comedian.

'It's only what *I* think,' concluded Pandora modestly. 'You were saying, Mr Humbleford, that industrial progress had given us——'

The Minister, without any mental strain, went on exactly where he had broken off. With a difference. Hitherto he had spoken at E. S. Penfold as the great

expert for the proper ventilation of the cause of a Ministry. But now, Richard Pennington, who was perhaps unduly sensitive, could not but ponder upon the lively satisfaction the Minister appeared to derive from Pandora's innocent girlish signs of animation over it all. He thought Mr Humbleford was carrying courtesy to a nominal hostess rather far. He comforted himself they would both have a little joke together about Pandora afterwards, a kindly man-of-the-world chat. He would thank the Minister for his good nature. He would explain about Pandora. Upon the whole it might be better to send her home. Yes, speaking of course officially, it might be just as well to send the dear child back to Sussex. Warmed by the prospect the Permanent Secretary was aware that the Minister was remarking, in the penetrating tenor voice of an orator addressing the Albert Hall, 'That was all the Industrial Revolution has given us. Out of the misdirected leisure, the drunkenness, the irreligion of the eighteenth century came the factories of the nineteenth century. Out of the twentieth century what shall come? Let us ask rather what has come already. The answer is higher wages, shorter hours, the desire for better housing, better education, a greater share of the happiness which is the birthright of every Englishman. Pennington here has hit one nail on the head. He says "teach the working man to play."'

'Pardon me,' broke in the scandalised Permanent Secretary, but was lost in the spate of the Minister's apologia.

'Yes, I agree. Pennington is right. He is, if I may say so, a democrat first and last, and an Imperialist if there is time.'

The horror upon the face of the Permanent Secretary, who was none of these things, appeared to cause the Minister's Personal Assistant actual discomfort.

'It is a surprise to me Pennington has got so far. He is at heart a revolutionary and none of you knew it. However, that's another matter. What I want to say is we must remember the working man, but by that I mean every Britisher from the Prime Minister downwards. We are *all* working men.'

E. S. Penfold started violently. It caused him real distress to hear a sentence simply thrown into the empty air which every newspaper proprietor would put in leaded type, and which would be quoted from every live pulpit throughout the land.

'The nineteenth century, I say, gave us toil unrelieved, unbroken, miserable toil. The twentieth century will give us play—recreation. Shorter hours mean greater leisure. Higher wages mean larger opportunities. There is nothing in leisure, gentlemen, simply as leisure. Any one can be idle. Nothing easier. Nothing more dangerous, more fruitful of industrial trouble, more injurious to mind and body. One thing is as certain as I am standing here,' it was a favourite remark of Humbleford's and its appeal was instantaneous, 'longer hours are gone. For ever. We must reckon with the hard fact that millions of our fellow men are wondering what to do with their spare time. That is where we come in. That is our job. I am a business man and I speak as a business man. I see things as they are. I must be practical or nothing.'

The Minister was not the first nor the last to support with genuine conviction that monstrous delusion. And the effect upon Mr Cantlie, Mr Penfold, and Mr Pennington was unmistakable. They all looked as businesslike as possible. Only Mr Whisperley, being a Treasury official was unimpressed. The Treasury has a short way with the man of affairs. He permitted himself a strictly confidential smile.

'I assure you, gentlemen, that you and I are on the

threshold of a new world. We have learned, however hardly, to appreciate the dignity of labour. We are about to teach the citizens of this great Empire to make the best use of their bodies—to concentrate their minds not simply upon work and money accruing from work, but upon recreation and the profound influence of scientific recreation upon the work that a man is engaged upon. He will be stronger, more balanced, less suspicious, less restricted in his horizon. The miner will play his round of golf with the bishop, and the railway porter make chess his claim to international recognition. It sounds wild and extravagant, gentlemen. Believe me, no revelation that has ever staggered the world has come with the soft pedal, but like a drill-hall of bagpipes. It made me ponder. I was taken aback. But I looked beneath the absurdities and I saw the real big idea, the national call for proper, intelligent, soul-cleansing recreation.'

E. S. Penfold made a hurried note on his cuff. He was not a believer in sending humanity to the wash and getting it back as clean and nice as a white shirt, but he liked a good, staggering, almost reasonable, stunt. He looked at John Humbleford with the respect of a fellow craftsman.

The minds of Mr Cantlie and Mr Pennington were obscure even to themselves. No helpful footnote is possible at this stage of Mr Humbleford's dialogue.

As for Pandora she knew Humbleford as the greatest man since—well, since her last.

And the Minister went right on. He seemed at home even with the longest and most intricate sentences. He delivered punch after punch with increasing snap and confidence. He passed from the broad survey to the personal necessity. One moment he was soaring through a heaven of cloudless idealism remote from data, the regions beloved by Mr Winterton and all higher

officials, while the next he was pinning them down individually and collectively to practical and embarrassing decisions, of which, for all they knew, his Personal Assistant, a dangerously silent young man, might be taking notes for a series of those letters in the *Times* between distinguished persons which are like stepping-stones leading from one incredible and absorbing scandal to another.

'To-morrow, gentlemen,' concluded the Minister, 'some of us here set our hands to the plough. We will go straight ahead. It may be a long furrow. We may falter—we may grow faint. But rather than turn back, I know I express the conviction of Mr Pennington when I say that honours, or recognition, or office, will count as less than nothing,' and in a kind of mental paralysis the Permanent Secretary watched the huge form of the Minister subside into his chair, and heard, as afar off, his horn spectacles fall from his stricken eyes upon the tablecloth.

CHAPTER XIII

I

DOWNSTAIRS, Richard Pennington having seen Mr Cantlie, E. S. Penfold, and Andrew Whisperley into the night, returned to the Minister, whom he found eating a sandwich which he had apparently produced from his pocket and drinking a glass of water. Richard Pennington, who loved the even temperature of life, was genuinely startled by the evident excitement of Mr Humbleford. In those early days, before he became resigned to the high altitude of the Minister's emotions, he was dazed and deafened by the confidences, the exposures, the warnings, the triumphs which Humbleford marshalled before him. As a simple Civil Servant he had not realised the awful pitfalls that underlay human intercourse. To John Humbleford life was a glorious melodrama. He lived in a perpetual shower-bath of plot and counter-plot.

'We have him, Pennington,' he said, munching a sandwich with emphasis, 'we have him here,' and he prodded the fingers of his right hand into the palm of his left. 'You knew, of course. You saw. Without him we would be crippled from the start. Now we are made. Nothing can stop us.' He thrust another sandwich into his mouth and looked at his Permanent Secretary with gleaming eyes.

'Cantlie?' asked Richard Pennington, quite in the dark.

'Penfold—E. S. Penfold. We won two of the biggest

assets in the country to-night, Pennington. Penfold, and you know who?'

The Permanent Secretary was gravelled. Certainly not Whisperley.

'Cantlie,' he repeated, like a parrot with one oath.

'What a fellow you are,' laughed the Minister with melodious enjoyment, 'what a gift to pull one's leg and never move a muscle. *Your niece!*'

'I am glad you mentioned her,' said Richard Pennington, relieved to set foot on more familiar ground. 'You were generosity itself. I did not want to hurt the child. She is so highly strung. Excitable. Her father's nerves.'

The Minister grew portentous. He levelled upon the Permanent Secretary the kind of steady, imperious gaze associated with the great human moments in history, and the annual perquisite of the Lyceum Theatre and the Royal Academy.

'Listen here,' he said, dropping to the low solemnities of his lower register, 'when that girl, Pandora Pennington began to speak, I knew what Columbus felt when he discovered America. That girl is *terrific*, Pennington. She is stupendous . . .'

After that, there was, of course, nothing more to be said.

II

James followed Pandora up the stairs to the library. His very soul blushed for Uncle John. How his aunt could ever have lived . . . But then, she didn't, poor woman . . .

And yet he was attracted by Uncle John. He was not proud of him. He preferred to maintain a strict anonymity. But he was attracted by the old boy. There was something extraordinarily lovable about Uncle John. However much he might have thumped the big

drum he believed in himself and his cause. It was one, of the most stimulating perplexing characteristics of Uncle John that he had a trust in his own destiny which was never shaken by the catastrophies of other days. Uncle John never looked back. He never knew when he was worsted. He went right on to new and tremendous disasters with a zest, a vigour, an assurance which was staggering. A man like that could never be ignored. He might not hold all the cards, but he always managed to palm a few. There was always in his career the element of a sporting chance. It was when things looked most black and formidable that he would take a line least anticipated, and harry his enemy on the flank. If the game was up, Uncle John did not know it. He had already gone. He had rejuvenated. He had passed like *She* through the fire and set out again.

That was James's rough estimate of Uncle John. If it was not sufficiently generous or charitable it lay somewhere near the normal. To the world, Uncle John was either a conscienceless humbug or a supreme genius.

James closed the door and said nothing. He was pledged in his own mind to stand up for Uncle John against anything Pandora might say. Both officially and personally he had every reason to regard Uncle John, so far as his detractors were concerned, as a man above the criticism of sniffy persons.

'Well,' said Pandora, from the shadow of the couch.

'I was surprised to see you,' he said. 'I suppose you realise I am the Minister's Personal Assistant. Interesting job, I think.'

He made a point of striking this stilted note to show Pandora that things had changed, and she, as only a kind of voluntary worker for an under official, was not expected to take a high line.

There was silence from the couch. Pandora was

evidently impressed. She was, he thought, earlier in the evening a trifle stunned by his official importance. Very natural, of course, and as a line of attack not to be ignored.

'Curious how I ran up against old Humbleford,' he said. 'I hadn't seen him for years. He begged me to come in. Not altogether my line, but promises to be interesting. Remarkable man——'

There was still a silence that could not but be reverential.

'As a matter of fact my Uncle John used to know Humbleford.'

Pandora looked up.

'Tell me, James, how is your Uncle John? You remember how distressed you were a year ago. I got to love your Uncle John, though, of course, I never met him. Is he still—you know——?'

'He has gone away,' said James shortly, 'far away. Quite away, in fact. Over the sea somewhere.'

'Poor Uncle John. And did he—you know——?'

James looked quite unusually put out. 'It was only a trifle—a few pounds. Nothing at all.'

'He will pay you some day, James. I feel sure he will. Couldn't you get him something to do in the Ministry now you will be so important?'

'I thought I told you, Pandora, Uncle John is ten days from the nearest post office.'

'Did you, James? I didn't hear. Stupid of me. James.'

'Yes, Pandora.'

'I was horrid to you the other day. Forgive me. Be nice to me—officially, I mean. When will you take me to see your mother? You promised your grandmother too.'

For some obscure reason he hesitated. Pandora was thrilled by a sense of some little obstacle.

'Grandmamma is ill,' he said rather bluntly. 'Some day, Pandora; I have told her about us.'

Pandora raised her eyes.

'There is nothing to tell, James,' she said sweetly. 'We are temporary officials, that's all. I want you to understand that. I like you to be important, but you need not jump to conclusions. Sometimes we may go out to dinner, or I may ask you here, and we'll talk about the Ministry and your Uncle John. I can't tell you how that man fascinates me.'

'Pandora, please talk sense. I agree that an armistice has set in, but do not think yourself safe. I am not so certain of the limitless prospects of this concern. I admire Humbleford—he is my chief and I would say nothing against him, but——'

'How can you be such a wet blanket, James. You do not know anything about Mr Humbleford—you admitted it a moment ago. You are prejudiced by the ignorance of other people—jealous people. I believe in John Humbleford. I think he is simply enormous. I am ashamed of you, James. If that is all his Personal Assistant can say, it is a good thing his Director of Publicity has some imagination.'

'Who is he?' asked James.

'It isn't a he,' said Pandora, smiling gently at the fire.

He started forward.

'Not—not you, Pandora?'

'This dismay, James, is hardly——'

'But Whisperley——?'

'I ceased to be interested in Mr Whisperley at 7.25. I have withdrawn Pelleas, who is now no more.'

'But——'

'Mr Humbleford asked me after dinner. He arranged it all. I am under you, I think, James. That is another reason for us to be strictly official. Promise not to say you know me, James.'

'I really see no reason for all this mystery.'

'I want it.'

'All right. I have ceased to know you.'

'Thank you, James.'

'Are you staying here, Pandora?'

'Living—not staying. And we are going to make this house a centre——'

'A centre?'

'James, how you echo! Not a place for people with a motive but a social centre. To boom John Humbleford. It's a great idea, isn't it? We'll have the right kind of people and talk together over the right kind of food. We shall spend lavishly. Think of it, James. A chance to go the pace for the good of unborn millions. What is my little packet of War Loan if the cause is good? Besides, it will be an experience for the rest of one's life. When the money is gone all will be over. The Arabs will fold their tents. Would you say, if you could tell which, of course, you couldn't, whether the Minister is indifferent to a——?'

'Short life and merry one, you mean, I suppose? No, I have a curious intuition that it would win his official sanction.'

'You are cynical, James dear. I did not mean that. Who knows, in future years this house may be pointed out as the place where Happiness was born.'

'Have you touched on the point with your uncle?'

Pandora permitted herself a smile.

'The Minister,' she said, 'expressed a desire to congratulate Uncle Dick in person for a scheme which, in his opinion, will prove quite invaluable. I am glad he thought it Uncle Dick's idea. I so want Uncle Dick to be better known. So does Mr Humbleford. We are a new society for the Propagation of Richard Pennington——'

The door opened and into the room came the Minister, followed by a Permanent Secretary appreciably older.

'Fullerton,' he said, 'are you coming my way? Splendid. Then I wish you good-night, Miss Pennington. I hope to see you to-morrow. Good-night, Pennington. This has been a memorable evening.'

The Permanent Secretary bowed. It had. Without comment he went with them downstairs, thrust upon them their hats and coats, threw open the door and closed it with feeling. Then mounting the stairs he entered the library.

'I am horrified,' he began. Something in the room, a vacancy, an indifference, aroused his suspicions. He paused listening, breathing his indignation in a faint, exasperated whistle down his nose.

From along the passage came the unmistakable sound of running water—Pandora pretending she had gone to bed.

'Is that all, sir?' said Blinkhorn at the door.

III

James found it increasingly difficult to connect the Minister with the Uncle John he had every reason to remember. One expects, with niggling meanness, that persons of questionable financial standing should bear themselves with absurd and grovelling humility, as though a five-pound note were the receipt for the subjection of the human soul. Whereas the unconquerable courage and sense of liberty shown by such persons should arouse our respect and belief in a hereafter.

It was ridiculous to charge Uncle John with selfish extravagance. He simply moved above the purchasing power of a small and diminishing income. He was generous, lavish even, and he loved the rush and the fullness of life. In company with Uncle John one always lived on the very fringe of some terrific event. One grew

accustomed to anticipation giving place to habit. Acceleration Uncle John mistook for progress, and in movement he found inspiration and undying hope.

In the taxi he went on speaking in his curiously fervent voice, tireless, certain of what lay just round the corner. In the darkness James watched the large contour of his uncle's face, the heavy jowled profile inseparable from leaders of public affairs.

'It has come so suddenly,' he was saying, 'that I was taken rather by surprise. It is a great acknowledgment, James. I knew it would come. I have kept at it for thirty-five years. Hard. No relaxation, no pleasure, nothing but work. And now my moment has dawned I will spread out a little,' and Uncle John made a familiar extension of his arms having, dear man, spread out just like that on the eve of all his other forgotten lands of trumped up El Dorado.

'It is a distinguished post,' said James feebly. He was already ashamed of his littleness and the mean horizon of his relatives.

'I must live up to it, James. I want you with me. I want you all to have a good time—a fine time. I'd better take a country house—furnished to begin with, and have a car to motor me to the London express. See to it, James. Never mind the district so long as it's suitable. Plenty of room—I like room. Room and air. And a garden facing south with a view of the sea. Let it stand on a hill, James, with a wood round the back. And then when this Ministry is really on its feet I'll devote a little time to gardening and poultry. In about ten years. I leave that to you, James. See the agents. I've got rooms in Tooting at the moment, but I want something near the Ministry.'

'What about the rent?'

'Rent? Oh, the rent . . . the rent . . .?' Better leave that for the present, James. I'm coming home

with you. About Grandmamma. She's always hated me, James. I've a little proposition to make to her.'

That, of course, was not unlike the Uncle John of tradition.

'And then, James, in that house in the country we'll have week-ends. Lots of people. House packed. By the way, better mention shooting. Only a few pounds extra. Neither here nor there. I want Pennington and his niece. What a find—what a wonder. Beautiful, too. Very beautiful.' The last two words fell from his lips pensively.

'About Miss Pennington,' said James, 'don't say you know me, uncle.'

'Eh? Say I know you. Why not?'

'My dear Uncle John, we settled it was better so.'

'All right. Perhaps you're right. What do you think of her?'

'She seems a pleasant girl,' James admitted.

The Minister was up in arms. He spoke from the heart.

'My dear boy,' he said, 'if I was ten years younger I'd fall in love with that child right off. I'd marry her. She's worth it. She's a treasure. To change the subject, what age do I look, James?'

'Wrong side of fifty-five,' was irresistible at a moment promising quite incredible developments. Somewhere something ripped in Uncle John's historic coat.

'I'm not!' he said with heat. 'Nothing like; more like forty-nine.'

After that they drove on in a strained silence, and alighted at the house in Abbey Road. The Minister, inspired by lordly Uncle John, threw the taxi man two half-crowns and swept up the steps as the clock within struck eleven.

In the close little sitting-room, with the vigilant glass

eyes of deceased family favourites upon them, and a small irresolute fire in the grate, Mildred Fullerton welcomed them with tepid cocoa and the low depressing undertones associated with Grandmamma.

They would have closed the door upon the dimly-lighted hall but Grandmamma had, early in the eighties, expressed a desire to feel—no more—that she was not altogether abandoned upstairs. It seemed to James that already some of the wide magnificence of the Minister had been shorn, and that the Uncle John of tradition was peeping through the holes. How many of those tremendous figures of the public arena can withstand the reminiscent gaze of an entirely stupid but unimpressed female relative?

'Well, John,' said Mildred, in the kindly tone she had come to associate with the domestic anxieties of poor Ethel, and would, even though her brother-in-law should become Archbishop of Canterbury or President of the United States, never entirely relinquish.

'How are you, Mildred?' He paused, and then to stem the silent hostility of that house and the unseen presence on the next floor, 'I've brought James back. Great evening. Splendid push off. Did you—did you mention the appointment to Grandmamma?'

Mildred hesitated.

'I did, John. But she is so ill. I'm afraid she won't last long.'

Uncle John nodded with an effort at profundity. Personally he was not so sure.

'There was a little matter, Mildred. I wrote her. I find I can write more easily to Grandmamma,' he added ingenuously.

Mildred produced some plain chocolate, and in a kindly twilight they crouched over the meagre fire and ate it. Uncle John gave even to the eating of a lump of chocolate an air, a sense of adventure.

'Grandmamma asked me to give you this,' said Mildred rather hopelessly, and handed him a letter.

Uncle John took it and rose to his feet. It was accepted by them all without question that Grandmamma would, of course, refuse whatever it was. That she had written was enough. It was when she maintained a stubborn silence that hope, however delicate, fluttered awhile. Not, of course, that Grandmamma ever acquiesced.

'It is the biggest, soundest proposition I have touched since 1885,' said Uncle John, who appeared strongly moved. 'It was a chance to make a million in a few months. I am satisfied that in a year Grandmamma would have been a multi-millionaire. I gave her, in confidence, figures and a statement by Colonel Joshua Broome, late of the Mexican Army, who has recently returned from the island concerned. Think of it! And I get this——' said Uncle John bitterly, and holding out the unopened envelope. 'Did she read the prospectus?' he asked.

'No,' admitted Mildred, 'she just said, "Tell John they are all the same, and save anything he makes now because nothing lasts long nowadays."'

At that, Uncle John, who was walking heavily up and down the room, released his exasperation.

'It makes one laugh,' he cried with ferocity, 'it is a subject for farce. For half a century that old, that bloodless, that monstrous incubus has sat upstairs hoarding the miserable wealth she did not earn, grinding the faces of the innocent, the aspiring, the idealists, and the workers'—they both looked modestly down—'What does she know about the oil-fields of Santa Dominego? I venture to say nothing, and less than nothing. And she refuses. Why? Because she is advised by a relative —*by me*. It is enough that one is her connection by marriage to damn one in this world and in the next.

This is the end—the very end. I have exhausted my patience. The woman is in her dotage. No sane person could read that prospectus and not back the thing to his last penny. And the money—just now—would have come in handy—quite extraordinarily handy.'

Uncle John had sunk into a reverie. It was one of those painful moments in the lives of eminent persons which are mercifully veiled from the public and give to the faces of their obscure relatives that anxiously guarded and remote expression.

'I see the time coming,' concluded Uncle John impressively, 'when the State will demand, and demand justly, for substantial proof of the desirability of certain persons continuing to exist. The effect of such a bill upon the domestic life of this country would be as far reaching as the Reformation or the abolition of slavery. . . .'

There was a knock at the half-open door, and Martha looked bleakly from one to the other.

'Mistress says wouldn't you care to talk in her room. Her door's open, but she can't quite catch some of what Mister John is saying.'

Again, as though no reply was asked or expected, the figure passed.

Over the house there fell the old appalling stillness. With mutual agreement they moved on tiptoe into the hall and James walked to the gate. They parted without another word. Lingering on the threshold of the empty street he watched the formidable cloak of the Minister pass into the mist and disappear. However, it might be to-morrow, there was only an Uncle John inside just then.

CHAPTER XIV

It was all so immensely different in the morning. Throughout the vast building where the Ministry of Recreation was settling itself with the earnestness, the simple trust, the burning hope of an inexperienced pullet overtaken by natural causes, the corridors resounded to hurrying feet. Voices raised in loud official agitation were hushed by higher official decorum. The Office of Works moved with sustained thunder up and down the stairs. Telephone operators explained, as simply as possible, to heads of departments just why their desks must stand within reach of the telephone cord, and heads of departments, refusing to understand, were soothed by attendant secretaries and cajoled with files.

On the ground floor the callers were commencing to arrive. There were the officials carrying despatch cases and recognising one another with stiff departmental nods. There were the distinguished strangers who must be seen and listened to. There were the first fruits of that noble army of persons, neither official nor distinguished, who persist in seeing anybody about something, and usually bear as a kind of menace a letter from a provincial M.P. All these signed little buff slips and passed into the unknown in charge of immature and distrait little girls.

Downstairs the Registry were busy upon the morning's correspondence and despatching, by messenger, files to various departments. The messengers passed and

repassed. They left files, or dropped files, or did away with files. They entered rooms of higher officials and lower officials with equal indifference. And every few minutes they returned like dejected homer-pigeons to their room, where a bright fire burned and a kettle simmered, and as urgent bells became more urgent, reached their crisis, and ceased, the messengers crouched nearer the fire and conferred together in earnest guttural undertones.

Every one of wide reading and culture is familiar with the great moments in our history when a word, a gesture, a secret smile might, or, on the other hand, might not, have shattered our national composure. It is not sufficiently recognised in our undistinguished lives as they are, or as they seem to be in books, or have to be on the stage, that every day, every hour, great decisions are made by quite obscure persons involving a spiritual combat beside which the historic moments of kings and potentates are as sounding brass.

Upon James the Ministry of Recreation descended like an anæsthetic. Sitting in his excellent room faced by an in-tray and an out-tray, a telephone, blotting paper, pens, pencils (some coloured), nibs, indiarubber, a small machine to stab holes in foolscap—all the official apparatus—he felt a sinking, a sense of calamity. All about him, upstairs and down, there persisted the dull vague sound of a Government department in travail. James was aware that beneath the spirit of youth and hope so proper in a fresh official venture, there were even now contending factions whose early skirmishes were already taking place, to be followed in due course by the battles of minutes, the word in season to a higher official, and the scene of congratulation (with a little dinner) when Mister Blank was compelled, through personal reasons, to retire, or if he was a very bad case, was promoted to some really important post.

In those early siftings and resignations, the ground was being cleared between the heads of departments (permanent) who knew how things would be done, and other heads of departments (temporary) who knew how things ought to be done. In this ardent conflict of routine between the old and the new, many of the weaker kind perished, and always, unceasing, somnolent but sleepless, the typewriters rattled, the files passed from room to room, innumerable persons walked in and walked out, hundreds of voices conferred in conferences ranging from two to twenty, under the glass roof cheap lunches were being cooked, in the basement boilers heated the rooms to intense, astringent heat.

To James, the fact that this army of the skilled, unskilled, obstinate, and persistently obtuse, had been drafted into departments and induced to sit at desks and do anything, was a stupendous feat. The ease with which Mr Whisperley, for instance, guided the stumbling footsteps of a band of ardent young ladies into the path of systematic routine was humbling. It occurred to James sitting there as worth a comment in his little book of thoughtful passages, and feeling lonely with all that industry going on, and his salary too, he unscrewed his Waterman, and aflame with delicate passion, wrote:—'And it occurred to me one morning as I passed down Oxford Street that there is too much chatter about the incompetence of Government offices. As I regarded Selfridge's, with its ebb and flow of ineffectual matrons, I speculated upon the dividends Mr Selfridge would pay were, upon one innocent summer's day, a thousand eager but quite unskilled young ladies thrust upon him and his own eminently efficient staff withdrawn. I considered the consternation of Mr Peter Robinson, the grave disapproval in the inner sanctuaries of Jay's, the eloquent glances between Mr Bourne and Mr Hollingsworth.'

'I like that one,' said James, and was aware a

messenger was crossing the carpet with a stack of files. The messenger permitted a number to fall into his in-tray and went his mournful way.

'These files,' said James aloud, and took one up. It was immovable. It clung to a companion with a persistence that was not to be denied. Those were the days of innocence. With a smile James dug lower. He rose from his chair and upset the ink-pot. He walked round his desk and heaved. They were one file.

Persons who have passed through the fire are familiar with the several ages of a file. There is the day, just an ordinary day, when the postman leaves a letter and the Registry people open it, read it, notice it bears, however faintly, upon something in Mr Smith's branch, file it and toss it lightly with two fingers into the messenger's basket. Mr Smith in due course replies. He says nothing, being an experienced official, and peace descends again. In a few days there follows another letter. The file returns. Mr Smith continues to be an experienced official. Slowly the weeks pass and the file expands. It can be lifted by the hand, but it crashes, not drops, into the out-tray. Then the jacket bursts. There is a new jacket and the older portions are attached. The new jacket bursts. There is a subsidiary correspondence with a local M.P., an interested public man, the lady's son, the doctor, and with a sullen roar the Minister joins in. Instantly the jacket bursts. There are five new jackets, six subsidiary parts, an appendix, an index, a summary, and a précis. Mr Smith has long since been sacrificed to hush the eager curiosity of the House, and the intemperate headlines of the Press. Larger questions are drawn in, as one war creates another, the Permanent Secretary is threatened, and instantly the file is lost. It simply cannot be traced. It is feared the Admiralty have it. The Admiralty, loyal to a fault, plead guilty. They regret that it is mislaid.

Departments close their ranks and the Permanent Secretary is in laager.

James was overcome by the sight of that file. It dated from the South African War when it raised the question of proper amusements for Boer children in British concentration camps. It had been in the care of the War Office in those days, and Lady Boulter—the creator of the file—was sometimes hard put to bridge over the barren months when her correspondence was unanswered, or lost, or acknowledged by official post cards. But a better day dawned when it reached the Admiralty on the question of proper and improving recreations for naval ratings on shore leave. Lady Boulter evidently had a relative there, as the letters started 'My dear Reginald,' and seemed by the departmental minutes to cause some one a good deal of heart searching. From the Admiralty the file had reached the Foreign Office and was officially moribund when the War sent it, nicely jacketed, on a cruise between the effervescent Ministries which have become a kind of promised land to elderly ladies of both sexes fron Southsea to Moffat.

With the trembling fingers of a man unfolding some ancient papyrus, he gazed at old forgotten dates, faded but indomitable writing, crests, well-known names, minutes of painful candour from one official to another, and, at the end of it all, a memo. addressed to him from Richard Pennington.

'With reference to Lady Boulter's letter dated 20.10.19 will you draft reply please for the Minister and return to me.'

That was all. A disarming simplicity. A call to action. James crushed, in that moment of official recognition, any numbing intuitions, any instinct of peril. He drew in his chair and began to read the latest but by no means the last letter from Lady Boulter. He

read it steadily. It was a long letter—she had developed a wonderful facility during the last four years. It referred continually to passages in previous letters (these, James felt, could be ignored), and it begged for a personal interview to explain in a few words ('I know how busy you are') the main objects of the movement for providing domestic servants with elevating and steadying influences. It was quite obviously within the sphere of the terms of reference of the Ministry. Lady Boulter must be answered of course, but with brevity—decidedly so.

'MADAM,'—wrote James,—'I am directed by the Minister to acknowledge your letter of 20.10.19, and to inform you that, although the question of domestic servants is under consideration at the present time, no announcement of an official nature has been made, and it is probable any scheme officially approved will be conducted by a Committee. It is hoped by the Minister that a further communication can be directed to you in the course of the next few weeks.

'I am, Madam,

'Your obedient servant,

He rang the bell for his typist.

'Miss Hodges,' he said, 'just type this on a minute sheet and direct the file to the Secretary.'

The telephone bell rang. Miss Hodges who took off the receiver, handed it with an alert official glance.

'The Minister,' she said solemnly.

At the other end was the deep melodious bass of John Humbleford.

'Can you spare a minute? Right. Come now. Miss Pennington is coming in five minutes. I want to see you first. . . .' The voice had gone.

Something of the immensity of the future came over James. The enormous file of Lady Boulter sprawled before him. To its vast structure—its solidity—he was, like so many before him, to add his contribution. He, like all those early pioneers, was setting out into the jungle aflame with zeal, and importance, and hope, while before him like a cemetery lay minutes and drafts, and letters, and threats, and again minutes, and here and there the bright delusion of extinction.

James rose, and passing down the corridor, hurried towards his destiny. He already carried that curious air of abstraction associated with grave official business. He passed Pandora's room, and through the open door heard her dictating a letter. The rush of it all. . . . In the Minister's ante-room a tall gentleman with a fierce white moustache was staring hard at a small gentleman with bulging eyes and a heavy northern nose. Behind these were several others standing by the window or holding their hats or reading the paper. James beheld the public, and he knew that within a few short hours he was divided from them perhaps for ever. They, too, all regarded him with animosity. It was undeniable that if he went in it meant they stayed out. The lid of a watch clicked irritably. James knocked and closed the door behind him.

At a desk littered with papers, supported by telephones, dictaphones, baskets, trays, calendars, cigars, and a solitary glowing apple, sat the Minister. Upon the wall hung maps, splashed with violent colours, and with flags pinned over them. There was a blackboard, there was a plain white sheet, and in one corner stood a black machine, half covered with a gray dust cloth—a thing ominous and menacing.

The Minister went on scrawling on a minute sheet. He pressed a bell. A lady secretary came in swiftly from a side room.

'Immediate.' Then looking up he nodded towards a seat.

'It's begun,' he said, 'the flag's down.' The telephone bell rang in the next room. The connecting bell rang beside the Minister. He addressed some one with his persuasive and astounding fluency emphasising this and that with thumps of his heavy fist upon the table, speaking with his eyes on James as though he formed an audience or a jury of appeal. And James was fascinated. His Uncle John of a few hours ago was submerged in John Humbleford, the Minister. Or was this the real, the misunderstood Uncle John?

'Winterton,' remarked the Minister quite casually, and rising to his feet crossed the room and stared at a map.

'When I left you last night I came straight here,' he said. 'I have been here hard at it for ten hours. I'll not break off until eleven to-night. I have a bed in there. This morning I have seen forty separate people. In that room there are to my knowledge another twenty. It's terrific, James—it's——'

'Not James, please.'

The Minister broke off.

'You're right,' he said. 'I admit it. Now look here, Fullerton. Let's keep on saying Fullerton.'

'Yes, sir.'

'Good. Look here, Fullerton, I am Minister, but I am not an official. They all know that—Pennington, Whisperley, and the rest. They think I'll come down badly. It's quite on the cards I will, but not because I'm worried about officialdom. At the same time it's a danger. It has its uses. It is upon occasions a wonderful breather. You see?'

But the mind of James was travelling in dark places. He suspected, but the idea was unbelievable. He shook his head.

'Think of me, Fullerton, as a fellow with a certain facility, driving power, a turn of speech—eh?'

James made noises of absolute disagreement.

'But I don't know the ropes. I can box, but I've never fought in public! There you have it. What?'

James hadn't it. He admired the Minister. He was impressed. But he sat in darkness. He was wondering whether Uncle John would have shone best in the presence of Napoleon, Abraham Lincoln, or Horatio Bottomley. That, in his opinion, he leaned towards one of those great figures more than the others was either prejudice or the light of pure knowledge. He wished he could have made a note of the idea for his little book of thoughtful paragraphs.

'I think in millions,' pursued the Minister. 'Mine has never been a niggling mind. Think big—do big. That's my line. I want this department to think in millions. I want young men, keen men. But——'

The pause was so abrupt, that James started and encountered a Ministerial glance affectionately proprietary. It disturbed him with the prophetic assurance that very soon he would be caught into this vision of Empire and sent gyrating into the abyss.

'The Government are backing this idea of a young go-ahead Ministry. The Press is backing it. I told them at a meeting yesterday; I pumped it into them. The country is roused. You wait, my boy, until you see our Advisory Committee. Representatives of every Government office, University, and public body. Experts all of them. Professional men. Business men. The keenest, the most learned and practical brains of the Empire, and therefore of the world. What do you say to that?'

'I must say,' admitted James, 'it is a better move than the usual departmental committee, however large.'

'Better move! I tell you when these fellows get

together you'll hear something. This is the day for the young keen man. I lay my money on that Committee. I know one thing already. *You will be staggered when you see them.*'

The Minister spoke true words. No youngster under sixty could have regarded that committee in bulk without profound emotion.

John Humbleford glanced casually at his watch. He pressed a bell. Into the room came Pandora. Long after James brooded over that scene and came to certain conclusions. They did not pour credit on his acumen but they applauded a manly simplicity of nature. Persons victimised by the confidence trick will appreciate the sentiment.

'Miss Pennington,' said the Minister, 'there is no one more familiar than you with the absolute necessity for the immediate selection of some one with quite exceptional qualities of tact, experience, and sympathy to deal with the problems and persons endangering the progress and ultimate success of every department.'

Pausing, the Minister looked up at Pandora in the manner of a dear Bishop conducting the more personal passages of the Marriage Service.

'I do,' said Pandora, having lost touch with the earlier outposts of the sentence.

'We agreed in a little informal conference,' proceeded the Minister, staring hard at the map, 'that the choice of such an individual, upon whose abilities the good name of the Ministry will largely depend, must be conducted with quite extraordinary care. There must be no room for personal motives, no shadow of suspicion that I or any one else have selected, as it were, a watch-dog to guard my back door. Is that not so, Miss Pennington?'

Pandora bowed her head. She seemed overcome by the grave issues at stake.

'In a department such as this,' resumed the Minister, 'there are always points cropping up which must be dealt with adroitly. I say no more. There are persons who must be seen and treated with absolute courtesy. The machinery must be oiled, Fullerton.' The eye of the Minister was unmistakably upon him. 'More than that. I referred to myself. I harbour no illusions in that quarter, Fullerton.'

Again James made appropriate noises.

'I know my faults. I am not blind to my shortcomings. I am prepared to stand alone,' said the Minister, releasing a tenor stop, 'but why should a man stand alone if he has an absolutely trustworthy friend to guard his back? At conferences there are occasions when a word on a slip of paper may turn a corner. I get excited. I admit it. . . .'

There was an uncomfortable silence. James was aware that Pandora was regarding him with grave deliberate eyes.

'I am determined,' resumed the Minister, breathing loudly through his nostrils, 'I am determined upon one thing. This is to be a Ministry fired by youth, not kindled by the thin flame of old age.'

Pandora bowed her head. James stared unhappily at the pigeons on the roof opposite.

'This is the dawn of a new era,' reverberated the Minister in a note faintly audible to the host of callers in the ante-room. 'I want young men here—men of vision—men of ideas—men of the future. Miss Pennington has recommended several. One of them—Michael Craig'—James started violently. He knew the man.—'is coming to-day. He is the son of Craig, the Scots newspaper man. His father holds the North. *Essential.* He will be under you, Fullerton. Another, Randall Hepworth. . . .'

But James had ceased to hear. The future was full

of twilight, simply up to the neck with it. Thinking of Michael Craig with his notably handsome exterior and romantic personality, he was aware of a loss of buoyancy, a faint distaste. Memories of partially forgotten years came back. He had been at the same school and the same college. Craig had persisted in being his friend. Craig, who was the idol of every don, master, undergraduate and schoolboy, for whose company and confidences the outer world hungered in vain, sought *him* of all people. Which was the more remarkable because Craig came from the North. His nature was reserved, and his temperament subject to fits of Presbyterian gloom. All this was disagreeable to James. He had a natural aversion to the Scots.

'The world is at the feet of the young men,' the Minister was remarking, in a kind of mental tarantella.

James returned to Michael Craig. His dislike was protective. He was not, he had never been envious of the fact that Craig was President of the Union, a triple Blue, a double first—all that sort of thing. Craig was without question not merely charming outwardly, but said brilliant and memorable things. It was quite simply that Craig bored him. He recalled, staring with veiled eyes at the gesticulating hand of the Minister, an excessively wearisome caravan tour Craig had almost compelled him to share. The caravan was very slow (he had suspected that), it rained insistently, and there was something very wrong with the sardines. In the evenings, in a damp wood, and upon an exasperated stomach, he had smoked a pipe morosely while Craig talked—lord how he talked—and read treasured verses from unappreciated moderns. And then talked on and on. Wonderful nights. Nights with a dawn.

He was aware the Minister had stopped. Both Pandora and he were looking at him with grave meaning faces.

'I am confident,' said John Humbleford, 'that there is

no one, Fullerton, possesses your peculiar gift for listening with patience to a case, weighing up a situation and acting with reticence and discretion. It will be a burden off my mind to feel you are there. And I am giving you Miss Pennington and Mr Craig.'

That was the historic moment of James Fullerton's career. Instead of avoiding with practised cunning the approach of persons intent on revealing their most intimate desires, beliefs, and forebodings, he was to place himself in the open like a man in the stocks for all the village to chuck their refuse at.

'There will be times,' said the Minister, dropping to the low resonance of prophecy, 'when, in the face of some delicate or embarrassing encounter, I will thank heaven for the proximity of James Fullerton. I know it. I feel it.'

They all felt it. But no one felt it as badly as James. He had a sudden blinding vision of infuriated gentlemen with upraised umbrellas, of large and menacing ladies, of the last stand before the final catastrophe. He was so stunned he took his sentence in a silence the Minister knew to be the modesty of a fine nature. He was suddenly aware that he was walking down the corridor beside Pandora, and that behind the closed door the Minister was driving ahead, eating up the hours, talking in that curiously impassioned voice of his, insistent, persuasive, challenging.

CHAPTER XV

I

'WILL you see them now?' asked Pandora, when they were back in his room.

James perceived the opulence of the Lady Boulter file and frowned. It had come back from the Permanent Secretary.

'See who?' he asked with a touch of asperity.

'Michael Craig and Randal Hepworth.'

'Are they here?'

'In my room—waiting to see you.'

James liked that. The knowledge that people, sometimes quite important people, are waiting without has given to official life some of the sweets of an Oriental potentate. Michael Craig waiting. Good; let him wait.

'There are one or two things,' said James, picking up files on his desk while Pandora stood at his elbow. 'The Minister has sent me a confidential memorandum,' he remarked.

Pandora took it wonderfully well. She was shaken, but she preserved her self-control.

'He desires that I shall form a branch for providing information upon all subjects of recreation. It will be necessary to compile the matter under careers and the kind of recreation best suited for the various professions, trades, and manual workers. The data will be invaluable for the Advisory Committee. It is also essential that a standing committee of experts will be necessary to work in touch with local committees over the country.'

Pandora watched him gravely. Encouraged and warming to a subject which, as they all began to appreciate, first with the joy of innocence, and later with darkening horror, possessed neither boundaries, limits, nor stages, James touched upon various aspects, probable developments, present problems. He concluded with a few personal and confidential comments. A little flushed and inwardly excited at a fluency which was encouraging and not without compensations, he leaned back and stole a glance at Pandora. There was an expression in her eyes which was new to him. A strange Pandora look. A little damping in its lack of enthusiasm, but reassuring again in its keenness, its concentration. What was behind that look? *He knew.* He jumped at it. Pandora, who had always told him he was static, had suddenly discovered his unexpected competence. They had discovered it together. It had lain, that pleasurable power of making things clear, in solitude, like a tin mine or one of Uncle John's wonderful grafts. Full of pride and thankfulness James veiled his triumph and rose to his feet. He even believed, so amazing are the delusions of the human mind, that a firm hand would bring Pandora to her senses, discipline her, in short. Afterwards—well, afterwards they could afford to laugh over it all. He was not a tyrant by temperament—good heavens, no.

'I want you to take charge of the staff for obtaining information. They must be men who'll work. Young men. The Minister wants them young.'

He was standing rather pompously by the window, as high officials are wont to do, and missed Pandora who, as the head of this interesting branch, permitted herself a gesture not unlike a fervent patriot waving a flag on Peace Day.

'The harder they work the better——'

'I'll see they work,' said Pandora, who was

already ticking off the subjects of her splendid tyranny.

Something in her voice disturbed James. He hoped she was taking it seriously.

'I'll see those two,' he said, 'and when you've made out a list of other candidates let them call. I'll interview them.'

Pandora made no sign. She simply inclined her head and went towards the door. How they would laugh about it all afterwards, said James, to comfort himself against a faint, a barely discernible uneasiness.

II

The Press was very kindly disposed towards the new Ministry. The leading dailies gave leaders of hope and guidance tempered with opaque allusions to Mr Winterton; the weeklies, in special articles, outlined with one accord, but with no sense of agreement, the only just, reasonable, and patriotic steps of progress possible were the scheme to warrant the enormous drain on the ratepayer which was, of course, inevitable. The frank, compelling candour of the Minister's ringing apologia, 'I think in millions,' had swept the country. It captured the imagination. It was felt that here was a Man—not a hedging politician, nor niggling official, but a fellow who was not afraid to admit that he thought in millions.

'In these days of cant and casuistry, of enormous waste on the one hand and pettifogging economy on the other, it is not too much to say that the nation has lost touch with the big things and is bemused with minutiæ. These are times to raise our eyes to the hills. "These are the days when the old dream dreams and the young men see visions.' That was the *Daily Flicker* and it told.

But these were, of course, the snarling, querulous, frankly antagonistic comments.

'We must answer these,' said the Minister, hurrying into James's room. 'Have you a good man? Then let him go round and have a chat.'

It was Pandora who usually disappeared for these homely dialogues. Until she got in Jamieson. He touched a high note in the later, more tropical days of the Ministry. . . .

But in the golden age of the department, that Elizabethan hour when John Humbleford might or might not be a kind of Peter Pan carrying his message of perpetual youth to a disgruntled world, there was a surging tide of expectation and energy which many were assured promised more than the old, old dreams of youth. The enormous, increasing, overwhelming activities of the Ministry hypnotised all those concerned in branches, or special work (such as poor Mr Smith without his carpet), or higher posts, or Members of Committees, into an honest conviction that such an expenditure of brain, ink, paper, and money must bring its just reward. The very voice of the Ministry, the low assuring hum of ceaseless conferences, the tapping of the army of typists, the insertion of innumerable stops in the telephone exchange, the monthly cheques to the higher officials, the weekly cash to the staff, the ebb and flow of the outside world —what could all this mean?

The callers came, were winnowed, were lost or discovered, misdirected or simply abandoned. But solid platoons reached James. They came, these strangers, so vastly different in appearance, clothes, and social strata, some of them without any particular reasons for coming, others carrying their reasons in a handbag, some alone and very anxious to be brief and concise, others trailing apologetic and perspiring relatives. In those early days he made a point—he boasted of it—of seeing the difficult

cases himself. He was proud of his sense of responsibility. He received long grateful letters which he once showed to the Minister, who was strongly moved.

But there came a time when the names of Colonel Jordan, who was interested in coal-heavers, Lady Wyse (milkmen), Canon Swinton (plumbers), and several persons who were prepared to be interested in anything he could propose, called forth hot, nervous untruths down the telephone, and often carried him right away to an important conference from which he might or might not return.

But there were others. Decidedly there were others. There was, for instance, Mr Sumpter and his potentates. However black the future and o'ercast the official horizon, he could, until the end of life's pilgrimage, cling with almost religious fervour to Mr Sumpter and his preposterous potentates. While their memory abided, while he could still catch down the travelled years the faint and fainter accents of Mr Sumpter's exhausted but unforgettable voice, he could tolerate the lesser hardships of obscurity and failure.

After all, he might not have seen Mr Sumpter at all. So appalling is the monstrous inconsequence and indignity of life that he might, being busy upon a minute, a thing written to-day and neglected to-morrow, have simply said, 'Please tell Mr Sumpter I simply have not a moment.' That would have been enough. Those simple words would have taken Mr Sumpter, accompanied by his potentates, right away. That vision, that panorama of empires, would never have been to him as a rich treasure house which none could break into and ravish.

But something stirred within him.

'Please,' he said, astonished at himself, 'ask Mr Sumpter to come in.'

Every one is familiar with that moment when a

complete stranger appears. A stranger is never so complete as when he comes to a Government office. In other walks of life a man may be unknown, his business may be dubious, but he has come to somebody in particular about something. In a Government Department that is not merely unlikely but unusual. The caller arrives because it is wet and he was passing, or because he mistakes the building, or because he simply cannot stand aside at an hour in his country's travail. He comes. But he does not want anything in particular. Nor does he desire to see any special department.

Mr Sumpter was extremely tall and thin, clean-shaven, with dark troubled eyes and pursed lips. He was dressed like a clergyman but did not appear to be one, and he spoke at once and went on speaking in a nervous, persuasive, threadbare voice.

'Thank—thank you,' he said, hurrying forward and dragging up a chair, 'my hat I will lay below my chair, so, and my gloves I will just pop inside.' He did so with a touch of pathetic levity, and stared at James with extraordinary intensity. 'There are things,' he said, 'which must be done at once or not at all.'

'Decidedly.'

'Perhaps you know my name. It is Sumpter—Hiram Sumpter.'

James lowered his head. The name sounded familiar; but then some names do. Was there not a great evangelist called Hiram Sumpter? If there wasn't there was an opening for some one.

'I see you do. . . . It makes things simpler. It saves our time. Listen——'

'You've put your feet in your hat,' cautioned James.

'Instead of my head,' said Mr Sumpter. He was a man of simple but never vulgar humour.

'Listen,' repeated Mr Sumpter, 'there are certain

persons interested in a scheme of world-wide and quite unprecedented international importance——'

'This,' murmured James, under his breath, 'strikes a not unfamiliar chord.'

'It will draw all peoples together. The East will know the West, and the West—well, the West will know the East. Now, please listen.'

'I am listening,' pleaded James, 'but your feet——'

'Thank you. What is the idea, or I should say, the tremendous conception of this society which I cannot name? Is it political? No. Is it religious? Is it commercial? Far from it. It is financed by some persons I prefer not to mention, and it has begged me —Hiram Sumpter—to leave England for five years next week. Now, can you guess the name of such a body? I can never tell you, but you may guess.'

It was so obviously Scotland Yard that James could only shake his head.

'I cannot go alone,' said Mr Sumpter, 'the circumstances of my work would forbid it. I must have assistance. I want,' he remarked, looking hungrily at James, 'a young man about thirty—handsome, quiet, well educated, tactful, unmarried. Sound intellectual attainments.'

James drew back. So that was it, was it? He knew he could not go. He *would* not be driven, cajoled, or tempted.

'I have yet to meet such a man,' said Mr Sumpter sadly, 'who in any respect possesses these essentials.'

'Perhaps if you told me his duties,' suggested James coldly.

'Ah, there you are! How should I tell you? If I do you will not breathe a word? There are people who would make it their business *to steal the idea.*'

'I assure you——'

'Thank you. The scheme, then, is this. It is the

intention of the Society that I visit, under proper conditions and all the best facilities—expense is no matter—those sovereigns, whether they be emperors or tribal kings, who appear, in the view of the Society, to contemplate local or international warfare. It is suspected by the Society that while diplomatists talk, time is wasted. In that interregnum, Mr Fullerton, in that moment of grave national strain you can picture me landing——'

That was one of the scenes James has pictured with deepening emotion ever since.

'In Afghanistan to-day,' concluded Mr Sumpter, with an encompassing gesture. 'In the heart of Morocco to-morrow.'

'I think it's a tremendous notion,' said James. Mr Sumpter stared very hard at him and clutched his broken hat.

'Doubtless,' he said, 'you understand. But has any one ever set out upon such a journey? How many strange peoples will I encounter, what pageantry, what splendour, what rich, glowing colour. As I pass upon an elephant of state along the sun-baked roads of India, or am borne with savage cries through some Malayan surf; as I watch in the company of the best kings and the right kind of emperors the sun sinking behind the deserts of Arabia, or wake to hear the coyotes lonely lamentation on the frontiers of the West. At such moments,' concluded Mr Sumpter, shaking James by the hand and hurrying through the door and down the passage, 'at such moments——'

'So long,' cried James, in a voice that trembled.

'At such moments . . .' floated from the swiftly-descending lift.

Hiram Sumpter was gone. That amazing man was flying downwards towards the street level. Soon he would be only a memory. But what a memory!

Standing in his room again James wondered whether Sumpter really existed. Was it but a kind of day-dream? Could it be there was no romance such as this in all the world?

Suddenly something attracted his eye. With a shout he dived and groped. In his hands he clutched, as the tangible bed-rock of a splendid vision, the frayed wash-leather gloves of Hiram Sumpter.

But above and beyond all these distracted persons there loomed ever closer the menacing presence of Lady Boulter. Upon that morning when Pandora went out to collect her bevy of young men, James opened the file for the second time and saw his minute to the Secretary, and underneath a paragraph in the precise and literal style of Richard Pennington.

'With reference to your proposed draft, I asked for a draft reply for the Minister's signature. In view of the public and official standing of Major-General Sir Jonah Boulter and his various activities, a formal and official acknowledgment can hardly be regarded as prudent or courteous. In the Minister's reply, it is imperative that he shall not commit himself or the Department.'

On the jacket of the file was a red slip marked 'Urgent.'

James was too eager in those days to say what he thought of the Secretary and, as a second reflection, where he wished Lady Boulter. He was piqued. It would not be well for Pandora or the staff to know he had got an official reproof. He admitted he had been a little careless. He had not connected the fact that the proximity of General Boulter might prove embarrassing. He saw it now. It was unquestionable; one must be careful in these matters. But still James was cool, inclined to dismiss the matter lightly. In the face of that file it says much for his heart action. He simply

had not the modesty to ring the bell for Pandora and say, 'Look here, about Boulter—the name's familiar, but my interest in war began in 1914 and stopped quite a while ago. Who was Boulter?' No higher official can afford to know too much. But no. Warm with the bustle of it all James wrote quite smoothly :—

30.10.19.

'DEAR LADY BOULTER,—In reply to your letter of 20.10.19, I am indeed interested to learn that you are anxious to promote the welfare of domestic servants. At the present time, however, the problems of employment in this sphere are in the hands of the Ministry of Work, and I know your kind offices would be welcomed by my colleague, Sir'—'I wonder who the fellow is,' pondered James. 'Better scrap that bit'—'welcomed by that Department.

'I am, dear Lady Boulter,
Yours very faithfully,

The minute, duly typed, was inserted and the jacket directed to the Secretary. Six days later James watched the messenger stagger in. The Secretary, whose room was thirty feet six inches down the corridor, had taken action. This time the file had a green 'Very Urgent' slip, a further note from Lady Boulter of six pages, and a memo. from the Secretary :—

'Reference your proposed draft for the Minister's signature in reply to Lady Boulter's letter of 20.10.19 and her further communication of 2.11.19.—your attention is drawn to the decision of the Inter-departmental Conference of April 1st, 1918, in which it was agreed by the Ministry of Work that questions arising from domestic service (females) should, in future, be included under the terms of reference of the Ministry of Recreation,

and questions arising from domestic service (males) by the Ministry of Welfare. In view of this clause the final sentence of your proposed letter is inaccurate and might lead to serious complications and grave confusion between the Departments concerned.

'Your attention is also drawn to the correspondence dated 4.6.02, 10.9.04, 15.3.07, and the official reply to General Sir Jonah Boulter dated 14.12.13.'

Advertisements of patent medicines can best describe what James felt just then. He turned up the references with a sense of doom. It was as he had suspected. They related to correspondence, memos., minutes, buried still deeper. They argued with each other departmentally and with Lady Boulter officially. They disproved previous statements. And every few pages was a cutting from the Press—a long terrible outburst by the General. After which a statement in Parliament, a temporary respite, a new line of attack by Lady Boulter. Closing the file in awe and dismay, James brooded upon the pale ghosts of his predecessors, all sacrificed to that insatiable hunger for official correspondence which gnawed like a mouse somewhere in Lady Boulter.

'I must draft a reply to-morrow,' he said. 'I must look into these Boulters. I shall go to the club, and sit next to Doulton, who represents the sterling qualities of the English race.'

Cheered by such a call to action James took his hat and coat and left his room.

The charwomen, congealed in their interminable disclosures at his door, passed inward.

In the next room Michael Craig was talking in his low glowing voice to Pandora. They did not look up. Vaguely irritated, James walked on. It occurred to him, simply an idea, that it would be a pity if Craig made an ass of himself.

As he came out on the pavement an official car rushed up and the Minister jumped out. 'The Advisory Committee to-morrow,' he shouted, 'at ten-thirty at Conference Building.' The great Advisory Committee upon which all depended.

Again silence, and James stared for a moment up at the Ministry. In one of those rooms, with the light streaming into the night, Michael Craig was in a glow about everything.

'He'd better ask her out to dinner,' grunted James, determined to take a ridiculously morose view. Michael Craig did. And afterwards they went to a theatre, and he walked home with Pandora to Chelsea.

Pandora told James all about it in the morning.

CHAPTER XVI

I

THE day following was given over to conferences. To a casual person a conference is rather an imposing business, like a meeting of the Cabinet or the Church Congress. The splendid elasticity of the term has never been fully appreciated. About ten o'clock on that morning upon which the Advisory Committee was due to meet, there were dozens of conferences all over the building. In business circles, when Mr Smith has no returned from luncheon with Mr Walker, the clerk, preserving always a splendid gravity, remarks that he is at an appointment. It is the visitor who thinks darkly of 'bears' and 'bulls' and the rest of it. In official life, when the telephone bell finds Mr Smith offering a Gold Flake to Mr Walter and asking him if he has heard that the Establishment Officer is going to be sacked—the former gentleman replies that he is in the middle of a conference. And Mr Walter's secretary is delivering the same solemn ultimatum somewhere down the corridor.

Or Mr Smith has a caller he wants to show off (some eminent person who has strayed in the passage), or a caller he cannot shake off, or a caller with a new and salacious anecdote, then he telephones and in a low official voice says, 'That you, Walter—oh, please put me through *at once*—yes—Mr Smith speaking—hallo—hallo—that you, Walter? Look here, I have Lord Blather with me just now. He is exceedingly interested, as you know, of course, in the question of recreation for'

('lord,' ponders Smith, 'what is he interested in?')—'in the question of recreation. I know you're very rushed —I know—I know—I haven't turned to my own letters yet. *Terrible.* Yes. You will? Thanks so much. And perhaps Percival would look in too.' There is silence at Blather's end while Mr Smith listens with the official austerity of an Oriental. Walters is asking if Blathers is the old wind-bag who was kicked out of the Board of Trade. 'No,' replies Smith, in the voice of a specialist 'phoning a G.P. 'A small, red-nosed bounder with a walrus moustache?' 'Yes,' again from Smith gravely. It is evident that Blather is simply a titled civilian—the philanthropic breed. Laying down the receiver Smith then presses a little white bell. That is to impress Blather who may or may not be worth a little quiet treatment in official psycho-therapeutics. The lady secretary enters from an adjoining room. 'Miss Job,' says Mr Smith, 'kindly note that I must not be disturbed until Lord Blather has left. Mr Walter and Mr Percival are coming, and if any one wants me, say I am at a conference.'

Mr Percival and Mr Walter arrive and again Mr Smith presses the little bell. 'Miss Job, will you ask Miss Rickets to come, please. I want her to take notes.'

By this time the unhappy Blather, who has only called in to offer a village hall, is surrounded by officials and begins to perspire. He wonders what he ought to say. The matter is removed from his hands. No one has the least interest in his fiddling meanderings.

Mr Smith, switching round his chair and lighting a cigarette, acts as chairman. It is his right, which Mr Walters and Mr Percival would be the last to dispute. Blather has alighted on Smith's web, not theirs. In due course they, too, will have their Blathers.

'If I may be permitted,' remarks Mr Smith, 'I will just run over a few points under discussion between

Lord Blather and myself before you were good enough to come.' He pauses, and Mr Percival and Mr Walters hastily assume the harassed air of men who can spare five minutes but will miss the last train by doing so.

Mr Smith then proceeds in excellent imitation of the concise and elaborate manner of Mr Pennington to inform his colleagues about quite a number of things which a few seconds in the company of Lord Blather (now showing signs of distress) had evidently inspired. 'Perhaps,' temporarily concludes Mr Smith, 'Mr Percival——'

'I'm afraid I——' says Mr Walters, looking with an agitated smile at his watch, 'I have a conference——'

'Then,' says Mr Smith, cornering the courtly delicacy of the Permanent Secretary, 'perhaps Percival, you will allow Walters to touch on the point under discussion from the aspect of his department. As I mentioned to you, Lord Blather,' goes on Smith, looking amicably at Walters, 'Mr Walters is in charge of the very important branch for providing recreation in the country districts within a fifty-mile radius of Birmingham, Stafford, Rugby—and do you include Crewe, Walters?'

'Not yet.' There was evidently some official undercurrent of humour there, for Mr Percival smiles at Mr Smith and Mr Smith chuckles towards Mr Walters. Only Blather sits in a state of mental and physical isolation and collapse.

'Not Crewe as yet,' amends Mr Smith officially, and all three gentlemen stiffening up after the Whisperley school, regard Blather with an arctic stare. From that point the conference widens its boundaries—it becomes more general and at times quite lively and playful. Only to Blather is it increasingly painful and immolating. He is suffering from the early symptoms of pernicious

anæmia. The call for the open hearth becomes almost unbearable.

And still in low, persistent undertones they go on. All over that huge building, and in all the other kindred buildings, staring with conscious austerity upon Whitehall, where one or two are gathered together, the low, persistent undertones go on.

There are the larger, the departmental conferences. The Ministry of Recreation delighted in these. To them came young representatives from other Government Offices, and a conference fitted in nicely between ten and one. The young representatives took a great number of notes and raised knotty little questions of procedure and invariably, when drawn into questions affecting their own departments, stated very rightly that they could not speak for their superiors, but that the matter would be submitted. . . . Then the chairman, aware that he was lunching at the club with the Parliamentary Secretary, coughed and the conference rose *sine die*. They rose and joined their hats. One could tell whether Robinson was there by a glance at the familiar hats on the pegs in the corridor. Robinson was so sure of his position that he wore a faded bowler with some spinal trouble in the brim. Whereas Campbell only averted disaster by a cream-coloured soft hat, spats, excellent wine, and an instinct for staying rigidly at the office. It is your man who takes long week-ends who receives a charming little note at Brighton regretting . . . As one of Pandora's cynical young men remarked, 'And the fellow who gets the 'flu usually gets the push as well! The chance is too good to be missed.'

There are, as all the world knows, the big conferences, the bigger the better, and these are either inter-departmental or advisory, or both. The purely inter-departmental are attended by higher officials, men of large mature faces who bring smaller officials at their heels.

Upon occasions when a question is asked—an official question—the face of the higher official remains as unmoved and profound as the summit of Popocatepetl. And into his ear or into his hand, or by some other necessary though crackling channel, the smaller official says, 'Impossible. There is an Order in Council.'

'I am afraid, Mr Chairman,' the higher official remarks with deliberation, 'in fact there is no possible alternative but to state that so far as my Ministry is concerned such a step would not only be considered inadvisable but simply could not be countenanced. Am I not right, Mr Smithers?' he adds, staring without recognition at the smaller official who wriggles with gratification and goes very red and behaves, in short, as though anybody was noticing him or caring whether he agreed or not.

II

All that day James dovetailed one conference into another. It was simply terrific. Left one no time to think. The kind of life a solicitor is paid seven and sixpences to endure. Conferences and callers. He looked into the future and saw nothing but conferences and callers.

When he arrived he was full of General Boulter. Doulton had dined at his expense on Boulter last evening. He felt he knew all about Boulter. How, if it hadn't been for that great soldier, we wouldn't be where we are to-day. That bit had seemed to James a little vague at the time, but he hadn't cared to butt in when Doulton was evidently so strongly moved. Doulton had admitted Boulter had his enemies and stared about the other diners with the sinister ferocity of a witch doctor—he said that he would like to meet one of the fellows who talked rot about the South African War. He drank a

glass of port and asked whether any other man was accorded the amazing reception that was given to Boulter, whether any other general meant the same to the Empire and took the same stand for the country. He glared about the club which, being one of strong Conservative principles, was entirely quiescent and in strong sympathy, several older members beckoning the wine steward with stern set faces. Doulton, drinking off a third glass of port, remarked, 'I know one thing. If Boulter had been sent out to France the war wouldn't have lasted as long as it did.'

And although James professed no particular intimacy with Doulton he had a kind of instinct that Doulton was right. It wouldn't.

He came away with no facts whatever about Boulter, but with the conviction that for some obscure reason the General was a figurehead, not a name coldly esteemed, but the sort of fellow who sets the pace in moustaches and is cheered hysterically on the screen.

Sitting in his room making a few notes for the Conference of the Advisory Committee he still was puzzled and uneasy. Might it not be well to ask the General to call? Many of his predecessors had been electrified by such a pleasant back door. But the General never called. In fact, the General was rarely seen. The mystery surrounding the distinguished soldier added to public veneration, which accorded his occasional outbursts some of the colour of a revelation from the other world. No, it was soon evident to James that Lady Boulter would never fail to attend an interview (if asked), but that the General was determined to husband his thunderbolts.

James rang for Pandora.

'Have you amongst your staff some one who is—how can I put it?—not sloppy or conventional or precious.

The kind of fellow who writes the short leaders. A little cynical. Rather superficial.'

Pandora narrowed her eyes.

'None of them are sloppy. None are conventional, she said, with a quiet assurance James understood better later. 'Precious—yes. One of them shows symptoms —real symptoms. He may get the better of it——' Her voice trailed into silence and just as though she was not altogether satisfied he would. James veiled his eyes. Pandora in a kind of flower dress with her horn spectacles and pensive lips. . . . In fact he looked down. Not that Pandora's taste nor Pandora herself appealed to everybody. There was a young man on the fourth floor who had made an audible comment about window curtains just as though this were a free country and people could say what they pleased. And Pandora's young men marched out. They begged the miserable to choose one of their number. They made a ring. Then they marched solemnly back.

'I think,' Pandora was saying, 'Dick Stanhope would do. If not Jerry Makepeace says more really horrid things than any one——'

'Please send them both.' He broke off. 'Pandora——'

'Now then,' she said warningly.

'All right. But look here, when can I see you? Will you be in this evening?'

'Should think I will. I've a dinner on. I'm going to ask the pick of the Advisories. Uncle kicked, but I feel it a duty. I'm paying, anyway. Did I tell you I've got a car, James?'

'Now then——'

'A car, Mr Fullerton. It's not paid for, of course. Shall I give you a lift some day. I *am* having a good time,' concluded Pandora in the musing tone of a person who could unveil some truly appalling side-lines.

The clock struck ten. In half an hour the Committee would be arriving. James had a vision of keen and eminent persons rushing swiftly up the lift.

'I had better see these two,' he said briefly.

Pandora drifted in her noiseless fashion to the door, regarded him thoughtfully for an instant and left. After a pause there was a boisterous knock, and into the room came a short ruddy young man followed by a prolonged, unutterably sad companion of about thirty-five.

'Please sit down,' said James. He gathered from them that the smaller one was Mr Stanhope and the tragedy, Mr Makepeace. 'I'm sorry to trouble you,' he began, 'but I want to have your opinions. Not information—just personal impressions. I have before me a file dealing with the wife of General Sir Jonah Boulter——'

He stopped dead. The very mention of that historic name was arresting. The expression of Mr Stanhope, hitherto genial, became radiant. The eyes of Mr Makepeace were haunted by some secret thought quite evidently profane.

'From the departmental standpoint the General is a decided factor. He is apt to be troublesome. The public seem to have a genuine admiration, to put it mildly. They may be right—I don't know. If you were asked, Mr Stanhope, to say a few words about Sir Jonah what would——'

He got no further. Mr Stanhope was off.

'At the age of fifteen Boulter saved the life of his commanding officer——'

'Who had dined,' remarked Mr Makepeace.

'At twenty he won the amateur boxing for heavy-weights——'

'He shot the poacher about then and rescued the ship's cat in mid-Channel,' put in Mr Makepeace gloomily.

'In the war against the Dervishes he dressed up as

one and would have got valuable information had he known the language——'

'And not been captured,' amended Mr Makepeace.

'But they let him loose——'

'You bet they did,' put in Mr Makepeace, 'and the country paid on the quiet, anyhow.'

'He went into Parliament,' continued Mr Stanhope in a glow.

'And was carried out by the heels for saying—what did he say?—' ruminated Mr Makepeace, 'anyhow that did it. The public never forgot it. Boulter was a made man. There was not a public house throughout the Empire where his health was not drunk for weeks on end.'

'But the South African War topped everything. That night attack on a kopje that wasn't on the map to surround a commando that wasn't there. All England rang with it. Men wrote home about it. They swore by Boulter. Said they'd follow him anywhere. And never forget he fought once in his pyjamas. We gave him headlines for that. Sermons were preached about it.'

'But,' broke in James, chilled by this cynicism, 'admitted that Boulter is not a genius, there must be something about him——'

'There is,' agreed Mr Stanhope, overtaken by the pure joy of Boulter, 'he never admitted defeat. There is nothing succeeds like failure. That is the genius of Boulter. His reverses were new to the text-books. He achieved defeats unknown in war. His appeal to the man in the street is obvious. He sees in Boulter a glorified manifestation of his own innumerable blunders and fiascoes. When Boulter hits he has the whole British public at his elbow. They know he's not one of the clever, intriguing, unscrupulous breed. Look at his casualties. Nothing niggling there. He's the stuff. *He's Boulter.*'

'Have a drink, old bean,' said Mr Makepeace with horrible calm.

The clock was nearing the half-hour. James rose and collected his memoranda for the conference. He thanked them both and watched them go. At the door he asked simply as an act of courtesy, 'Are you liking it? Don't find Miss Pennington overworks you?'

'We are a band of brethren,' said Mr Makepeace sombrely, 'united by a bond of sympathy.'

That gravelled James.

'You see,' said Mr Stanhope brightly, 'we've all been engaged to Pandora some time or other, all, that is, except Craig, who will be soon.'

CHAPTER XVII

I

THE Government decided about this time to devote a central building to the service of conferences and standing committees. It was felt to be a step in the right direction, enabling delegates with various interests to move from one room to another and thus save the time and treasure of the State. The congregation of so many experts on every conceivable subject under one roof appealed to the imagination of the public, and the speech of Mr Winterton in the City Temple upon the conservation of national endeavour was felt to point the road to systematic reconstruction. It will be recalled that Mr Winterton compared the welfare of the nation to the processes of health upon which the human body depends. He spoke of the sympathetic alliance between brain and muscle. He had a vision of the intellect, the expert knowledge, the cream of the professional and labouring classes seated at the head of the State, and from every commercial centre and remote country parish the messages winging their way, so that when men looked up at the dome of that gigantic building where the conferences sat they would pass on with the splendid assurance that the machine of reconstruction, systematisation, and progress was revolving on the wheels of national prosperity. Mr Winterton stated that he was not going to delude them into the notion that such a vast scheme, relying as it did upon the finest brains of the community, would not cost the country a capital charge. It would. He was

not prepared to say it would not run short of many millions. But he asked the business men present, and he could see no farther back than the third pew, his friend Sir MacGregor Rosenbaum, whether any company undertaking great financial obligations in the best interests of its shareholders was not as an initial consideration compelled to raise substantial monies? It was a statement no man of affairs was prepared to deny.

The idea, in short, of running the Empire like a public company appealed to the nation very strongly, and paved the way for the nationalisation and appropriation of quite a number of goods and chattels which belonged to certain grossly unpatriotic persons apparently altogether lacking in vision and lost to a sense of public spirit.

Conference Hall could accommodate a hundred conferences ranging from five to thirty persons, was fitted up with an extensive reference library, a dining-room, a smoking-room, a drawing-room, where the delegates could receive ladies, a number of bedrooms for members sitting till dawn, a public hall for public meetings or the reception of large bodies of persons coming up from the provinces, and ample accommodation for a clerical staff. An enormous board in the entrance hall gave particulars of conferences sitting, their subject of discussion, the present speaker, and so forth. There were conferences which had sat for months and would, God willing, sit for years. Many a father looked forward with pride to the day when with hot tears in his eyes, he would introduce his son to the colleagues of half a century. There were the temporal conferences, the daily conferences, the conferences between conferences, and the conference which visited each conference in turn.

James reached Conference Hall to find the entrance hall packed with delegates all staring very hard at the

board and hurrying off into lifts, which sped upward giving glimpse after glimpse of silver beards and bald heads as it were shooting up to heaven.

'The accumulated age of this building,' mused James, 'must carry one back to the first recorded conference in the Garden of Eden,' and seeing the Minister speeding past he followed him into the lift. John Humbleford was carrying a large brown despatch case and was preoccupied. They walked briskly down one corridor after another, passing doors upon which was printed the name of the Committee and the subject of its low persistent deliberations.

'Here we are,' said the Minister. The room was large and very cold. The windows were open and a small fire burned in a kind of official monotone in the grate. The table was covered with a dark blue cloth, and opposite each chair was a square pad of red blotting paper, foolscap, pens, pencils, and an ink-pot. There was an imposing seat at the far end evidently for the chairman.

'Wonderful place,' said the Minister, 'Winterton's idea. Co-ordination. Concentration. Encyclopædic. Think of it, my boy! Can you picture it? Under this roof working together—team work in brains and labour, Fullerton. Here the thinkers—there the workers. It is the beginning of a new eara. I feel when I try to get a grip of what it all means that I am ten years too old. They don't want men of fifty here.' He was right—they didn't. But the eyes of the Minister were fixed upon a clean-shaven, keen-eyed competent young man who was cajoling the fire.

'That's the type,' whispered the Minister. Yes, James admitted that he was obviously a go-ahead, sound, broad-viewed fellow with a Cambridge rather than an Oxford look about him. The Minister simmered with satisfaction. He would make sure of this delegate before the others came. Simply as a precaution. There might

be one or two academics with pre-war views. One never knew. He started in without delay. There was never any time lost with John Humbleford. He did not require to take breath nor to think ahead. And it made no difference whether people agreed or not: he was not one of those dependent speakers. He threw out a few spasmodic commonplaces about Conference Hall, and was certain, so he said, that Mr Jenner (he had got his name earlier on) would support him in his conviction that representatives of the Advisory Committee should sit night and day in case of calls from the farthest frontiers of the Empire. Mr Jenner replied that so far as he was concerned night shifts could be arranged.

The Minister, without pausing, desired to impress upon Mr Jenner that men of his stamp could make and *would* make—he wanted no doubt on that point—all the difference during the more critical moments of the Conference. He said he knew Mr Jenner would regard it a point of honour and of national duty to be present at every sitting. Mr Jenner promised he would. The Minister, worked up to considerable emotion, begged Mr Jenner to look not so much at the present as the future.

'I can tell you, Jenner,' said John Humbleford, lowering his voice and gripping the convert's coat, 'I can tell you because I knew at once that you and I are both men who take the big view. I have settled to-day—this is strictly confidential—the preliminary arrangements for the greatest, the most inspiring, the most revolutionary —in the progressive sense, Jenner—the progressive sense—alliance, that the world has ever conceived. People talk of a League of Nations. What's that? An international alliance based on fear. But here—listen, James, please—here in this hall very shortly will be gathered representatives from every nation, race, and tribe to discuss together the ethical, commercial, physical, and moral value of recreation. It is the instinct

of rivalry, not in arms or trade, but in the playing-fields which will unite the world.'

He may have been right. There was always under the grandiose, the amazing, the preposterous rubbish heap of Uncle John's ideas a flame of the divine fire. Always throughout his life it burned with a thin and tragic insistence, emitting for so small a thing a dense and overpowering cloud of smoke.

It is impossible to say what Mr Jenner thought about it all. His refined, grave eyes betrayed no inner mental activity. He seemed to John Humbleford one of those intellectuals without the combative sense, but with his feet set fast upon a rock of principle.

The mind of James, on the other hand, was kindled by that International Conference. He had a vision of the desert with the soundless feet of camels bearing Aston Villa to the furtive Bedouin, and, afar off, under a sky of blazing glass, the heroic golfers of the north carrying the glad tidings to nude and expectant cannibals.

The Minister had stopped dead. He had the face of a man who has emptied his battery and can do no more.

'By the way, Mr Jenner,' he asked, 'whom do you represent here?'

James drew nearer.

'I am the messenger, sir,' said Mr Jenner.

II

It is open to question whether the Minister heard. He certainly made no sign. He was staring at the open door with an expression so poignant that James and Mr Jenner started and stared too. Coming slowly into the room shuffled two persons of such extreme age that no man in the prime of life could look upon them unmoved. They clung together, their white beards guillotined by

comforters, their soft black hats pulled down to their frosted brows, their ancient hands gripping with tenacity despatch cases, their pockets sowing loose documents along the floor. The eyes of the taller were shielded by blue spectacles, but his companion, speaking monotonously in a high, deprecating tone, stared at the men before the fire with a natural ease of rudeness which only the seats of learning can endow. And yet to James it was a higher thing than mere incivility. There was in that lifeless gaze, a mobility, a heritage from far-off times, like the glassy stare of certain fish moving below the level of the tides.

'The point,' said the smaller delegate, hunting feverishly for his handkerchief, 'the point, my dear Rew, was not one of principle but one of University regulations. I refused to agree and the Committee was adjourned for a month.'

It struck James as a tribute to the unconquerable soul of man that any one of such extreme old age could speak of anything so far ahead. A week perhaps . . .

The Minister watched them struggle out of their black coats, unroll their wrinkled necks, display their arid heads, blow their crimson noses, and made no sign. He was overwhelmed.

'It is very cold here,' remarked the taller delegate, elbowing his way to the fire. 'Why do they keep these rooms so cold?'

'I got a chill at the conference on Friday,' complained the smaller delegate.

'Fortunately, I put on a thick woollen waistcoat,' said the other.

The Minister made an effort. In after days James said that he is confident John Humbleford had not come to his great decision so early in the proceedings.

'May I introduce myself,' he said, 'my name is Humbleford.'

'How do you do,' said the taller survivor of the Oxford Movement. 'I am Professor Conserve. This is my friend Professor Rew of Cambridge.'

'I don't know what they want encroaching on recreation,' said Professor Rew crossly, 'can't imagine. And we ought to be familiar with the subject, Conserve.'

'It's out of the question,' spluttered Professor Conserve, in a sudden dither of senile passion, 'quite monstrous! Waste of public money!'

He was as quickly chilled by natural causes and crouched over the fire. Together those ancient persons rubbed their blue hands in preparation for the fray.

But the Minister was staring over their bowed heads towards the doorway. The passage was emptying delegates into the room. James recalled the words of the Minister, 'You will be staggered when you see them.' The Minister had spoken with the gift of prophecy. One at a time those venerable men, eminent in official and public life, would have impressed him. In mass they were more than a fugitive page in history. They covered solid chapters. There was Admiral Sir James Macleod, representing the Admiralty, a clean-shaven cross old man with his mouth to the drooping ear of Major-General Sir Whishart Bellringer, who came for the War Office. They both brought the Crimea very near. Then there came in a little confidential group Sir Bernard Binyon for the Board of Land, one of those elderly men with what is called a mature judgment, Sir Harold Heritage, a perpetually smirking official of the Ministry of Crises, and one of the most logical, convincing, and resolute obstructionists of the day, Sir William Bagge, representing the Chambers of Industry, Professor Dochart, a kind of Landseer picture, from the Scottish Universities, Mr Smart (younger, but forming well), for the Ministry of Work, and those miscellaneous rather

baffling persons who, in speeches of quiet eternity, are deferential but firm.

The Minister looked quickly from one to the other as an emigrant landing on a strange quay longs, without expectation, for the sight of a homely face. In all, he met the arctic, the portentous, or the merely neutral eyes of officialdom. The sight of Richard Pennington and Andrew Whisperley warmed him with a momentary flame of hope which perished and became cold ashes at the introduction of the chairman, Lord Caulfield. Caulfield was neither old nor aggressive. His record in *Who's Who*, like quite a number of others, makes people cry, 'My goodness, why have I never heard of this fellow? He's fourteenth baron, educated at Eton and Oxford, married a Duke's daughter, was Secretary to the Chancellor of the Exchequer, stood for Parliament, was Governor in succession of Natal, Orinoco, Bechuanaland, and the Isle of Rhum, a K.C.M.G., a G.C.B., a G.C.V.O. . . .'

He entered the room smiling gently here and there, amiable and quiescent, rather deaf, but very anxious in consequence not to miss a point. He had attended conferences, usually of the grand type, for a quarter of a century, and he treated them as polite functions for orderly official intercourse conducted with proper deliberation and relieved by moderate asides of inoffensive wit and appropriate allusion. He came to this conference with an unclouded brow just as he had come to countless similar gatherings in his long and placid career. He recognised Macleod and twitted him with charming delicacy upon a certain dinner in Bengal. He had a little morsel for old Bellringer. He exchanged the friendliest smiles with Binyon and Richard Pennington. And they all hastened to smile back, knowing how intimate Caulfield was with a certain royal personage and how a word in season. . . .

They seated themselves as the Chairman, placing his spectacles on his nose and resembling very closely an eminent consulting physician, bestowed a universal smile and said, 'Well, gentlemen, I think I need not impress upon you, who know so much better than I, the very great national importance of the work which has been placed in our hands. . . .' With bland serenity he proceeded to commit the body to the deep, and considerably later begged the various representatives to listen very carefully to the views the Minister desired to put forward. After which it would be possible for each member of the Committee to say a few words from the point of view of the particular body or department he represented.

It was at that moment that John Humbleford discovered that he had left his despatch case with his hat outside in the corridor. He rose with apologies to the Chairman, who beamed back, and hurried from the room. He particularly wished to show the Committee one or two rough schemes. In the passage things were made more arduous by the loss of his glasses which he laid on the conference table.

In the pause, Professor Dochart, addressing Lord Caulfield with that appearance of personal animus peculiar to gentlemen within hail of Aberdeen, stated that he had travelled all night and that he trusted his fare would be paid.

The Chairman looked smilingly around.

Mr Pennington, in the name of the Ministry of Recreation, regretted that there was no clause authorising the Ministry to pay the expenses of members of the Committee, but that no doubt if the Treasury was approached by the Chairman in the name of the various bodies——'

Mr Whisperley interrupted to deprecate altogether the idea that under any circumstances whatever

would the Treasury pay and scowled at Professor Dochart.

The Chairman looked smilingly around.

Professor Dochart, now speaking in undiluted Scotch, and with one hairy hand in an empty trouser pocket, protested that this matter could not be allowed to drop so unceremoniously. He would be surprised to learn that he was alone in demanding proper treatment. There were representatives from the Universities of Leeds and Birmingham. . . .

Up to this point Professor Rew and Professor Conserve had been engaged in a whispered conclave regarding an obscure academic matter. They had heard there were Scottish places where students brought their porridge —quite worthy and even tolerably old establishments— but *Leeds* and *Birmingham* ! Exchanging mutual smiles they craned their ancient necks to catch a glimpse of these amazing people from what was it? Leeds, oh yes, and—Birmingham—of course, stupid of them—Birmingham !

The Chairman, losing interest in the matter, promoted his smile into a chuckle. He ventured to recall a rather laughable little episode—at least it had struck him as laughable—which had occurred during his Governorship of Brahmaputra. He proceeded with amiable gusto, and quiet telling pause and interlude, to permit them to share this little titbit of official life. And afterwards the Admiralty and the War Office recalled . . . And so things went very pleasantly and it was with something of a shock that James was aware that the Minister had been absent a full twenty minutes. Fortunately no one appeared to have noticed. He tiptoed from the conference room. The corridor was empty. His glasses —the Minister had forgotten his glasses. . . .

And as he stood there he heard the familiar penetrating voice in full blast. *In the room next door.* . . . James

was a man of immense nerve. He did not bolt from that terrible place and take the next ship to New Zealand. He straightened his tie and went in.

There was the same conference, the same kind of distinguished Chairman smiling around, the same venerable heads, the same expression of unfathomable age, the same papers on the table, the same cloth, the same unmistakable conference smell. And the Minister was touching great heights. For a man who might have appeared to a casual observer to be haranguing B. block of a town cemetery he was going strong. He seemed to James to be set on saying just what he had intended to say and then doing something that would surprise them all.

'Throughout our towns,' reverberated the Minister, 'the cumulative gain derived by co-operation should prove substantial. I think I may say, without prejudicing the interests of my Ministry, and I know Mr Whisperley is strongly opposed to decentralisation, that the first step, and it is a vital one, must be to drain'—to the amazement of James, the Chairman, plucked up at the word and said 'hear, hear' meaningly—'I repeat, to drain the resources of the country for suitable and regulated expansion. If legislation is required, legislation must be passed. If a Bill is essential, and it *is* essential, the State must meet its responsibilities. What is clear to-day is our duty to the country and to the generations unborn. Are they to pass their lives under the same disadvantages of body and soul? Are the sunspots of life to be perpetually overcast?'

The Minister stopped. The members of the conference stared with serene immobility at each other across the blue cloth. A very old representative kneaded one eye with a discoloured pocket handkerchief. The Chairman was consulting his engagement book under cover of the table.

'Gentlemen,' said John Humbleford sharply, 'do you know what's wrong?'

Not a person stirred. Not a pulse quickened.

'Gentlemen, you are too old.'

It must be allowed to John Humbleford that he was the first Minister in history to break the news to an official Committee.

Not a head moved. Only the Chairman dropped his little engagement book.

John Humbleford turned and went to the door. James followed. They passed out.

'I had to tell them,' said the Minister, breathing quickly, 'it's cruel. They shouldn't come out. Is there no society to prevent this kind of thing?'

'Why them?' asked James. 'They've done nothing to you!'

'As an Advisory Committee——'

'But they're not.'

'Good heavens—what—what are they?'

'Nationalisation of Sewerage.'

'But they were the same men—I recognised several.'

'Be calm,' begged James.

'Have they missed me in the other room?'

'Not in the slightest. They are on the eve of raising the question of smoking.'

'Shall I tell them the truth? Shall I say—you know?'

'Nothing could be more indiscreet, more hurtful. Copy Winterton.'

'I don't follow.'

'*Just stay away; they'll never know.*'

'How simple a thing is official life,' mused the Minister, 'when one understands.'

The Minister, brooding upon such things, went his way, and James slipped back to the Advisory Committee. Sir Harold Heritage was setting up quite a creditable obstruction in the way of any form of recreation at all.

Mr Smart was itching to follow. The Professors were deep in academic undertones.

'The Minister,' whispered James in the Chairman's ear, 'has been called to an important conference.'

'Of course, of course,' understood the Chairman, looking solemn.

'And suggests the Committee meet again in three months.'

'In three months? Better say *sine die*. Better say *sine die*,' whispered back the Chairman, 'there are the Christmas holidays.'

About an hour later Lord Caulfield rose and looked smilingly at his watch. 'Now, gentlemen,' he said, 'time is passing. I regret to say the Minister of Recreation has been called away to a conference—*an important conference*.' If the Minister had expired of apoplexy in the corridor, the members could not have listened in a more grave and sympathetic silence. 'We must therefore postpone any items on the agenda calling for his personal attendance until our next meeting. I need not say, of course, that the very valuable suggestions and recommendations contributed by members of this Advisory Committee will be forwarded by our Secretary, Mr Fullerton, to the Minister. Our Secretary, gentlemen' (the Chairman was simply charming) 'Now, gentlemen, it is not possible to suggest with any certainty the date of our next conference, but it has been suggested that standing sub-committees be appointed to deal with questions of policy within their professional experience. I may say that I personally think the proposal eminently helpful and practical. Very practical indeed. This vast subject of national recreation can best be dealt with in sections, and I would further suggest for your consideration that the sub-committees be empowered to co-opt additional members to sit upon these sub-committees in a purely advisory capacity. Whether it would be

possible to pay such extraordinary members an honorarium——'

'I'm afraid,' interpolated Richard Pennington, 'I speak, of course, simply for the Ministry——'

'Um,' said the Chairman smiling urbanely, 'then it may be prudent to approach the Treasury.'

'Quite out of the question,' snarled Mr Whisperley. 'Wouldn't consider it. Impossible.'

'I see,' said the Chairman, still smiling, but with a growing flavour of Cardinal Newman.

'I think——' said a voice.

The Chairman stared vacantly down the table. The Secretary referred with the rustle of autumn leaves to his list of members. It was one of those private fellows —no—it was Professor Pootle of Leeds.

'Professor Pootle of Leeds,' whispered the Secretary to the Chairman.

'Gentlemen,' said the Chairman mildly, 'Professor Footle.'

'Pootle,' from the Secretary, 'of Leeds.'

'Professor Pootle,' announced the Chairman indifferently, 'of Leeds.'

Instantly Professor Rew and Professor Conserve exchanged delighted incredulous glances and proceeded to stare with horror and disgust at this preposterous Pootle with his Leeds.

'I think,' said Professor Pootle, clinging with nervous fingers to the extreme outpost of a pendulous moustache, 'I think, with reference to a point raised by the second speaker before last—I have not the pleasure of knowing his name or college, and whether technical or not——'

There was an instant of universal tension and dismay. Then a beautiful smile lit up the face of Professor Rew.

'That was you, Conserve,' he said.

The battle of the Universities had fairly started and

promised to give its members on the sub-committee, Professors Conserve, Rew, Dochart, Pootle, and Ryder, an abundant scope for scholarly intercourse and good work of national progress.

The next item upon the agenda created a good deal of restrained interest. The question of settlement on the land has ever intrigued the outsider. 'There is not a person, old or young,' remarked the Chairman, referring to his notes for a rather telling bit, 'who has not his soft place for country lanes and country meadows and a glimpse of blue where the downs run into the sea.' He paused, and while Professor Rew blew his nose with a shrill academic note, Sir Bernard Binyon, of the Board of Land, preserved a curiously attached and isolated calm. 'In drawing the attention of the Committee to the grave national necessity for providing open air recreation for the workers within reach of the country, to permit them, as he believed the Minister of Recreation had so eloquently remarked in a recent speech, "to plant a cabbage with their left hand and lay hold of God with their right"—they would forgive him if he quoted from memory—he knew that there was no one present, least of all his friend Sir Bernard Binyon, who would not push forward with enthusiasm, and very great enthusiasm, any scheme for making the country-side of England a place not only of production—and he need not say how grave a necessity that was—but also a place of healthy and stimulating recreation. He need not remind the Committee that the Board of Land had been engaged upon this great problem for several years, that their able and expert staff assisted by Committees throughout Great Britain had spared no pains in issuing illuminating pamphlets, booklets, and other material broadcast, in order that every one might know that the hour had struck.'

And all the time, with sad and brooding eyes, Sir

Bernard Binyon preserved and accentuated that massive —that formidable silence.

The Committee liked the idea. Several members made helpful suggestions of the right methods to be adopted in carrying out a scheme they knew nothing about. It was agreed after prolonged discussion that an experimental colony should be opened somewhere—at the expense of the State—and that something should be done. *At once.*

The Chairman, growing quite tepid with the subdued fire of the meeting, begged his friend Sir Bernard to state as briefly as such an exhaustive subject would permit, the broad outlines of the arrangements—and if he knew anything of Sir Bernard, they would be ambitious—the arrangements in fact conceived by the Board he so ably represented to meet the expectations, the hopes, and—er—in short to inform the Committee without prejudicing the activities of the Board in any way, what steps had already been taken.'

Sir Bernard rose slowly. He was a very tall, mournful official with a deprecating, secretive smile, a slow, rather fretted manner of speech, and an enduring gift of biding his time.

He said very little. In fact, he was polishing his top hat as he spoke.

'Mr Chairman, gentlemen, I regret I must rush away to a conference. What you have all said is suggestive—very. But, gentlemen' (polish) 'there *is* no land.'

He smiled very kindly, almost caressingly at them all, and went with gentle pensive feet out of the door and down the passage.

Not a delegate stirred. Not a pulse quickened.

'The next item on the agenda and the last,' proceeded the Chairman with sudden alacrity, 'is the day and hour in the week most suitable for our next meeting. I may say, speaking for myself, but perhaps some of you are

similarly situated, I have interests which call me from town from Fridays to Tuesdays, but any other day I shall make it my duty to take the chair.'

There is nothing animates a conference like the hour of the next meeting. Professor Rew explained exhaustively how his series of lectures on Early English Art absolutely forbade Mondays, Wednesdays, or Fridays between 11.0 and 1.0, and Tuesdays and Thursdays, but not Saturdays between 10.0 and 11.0. Voices rose and ebbed. There was a flourishing of little engagement books. 'I think,' said the Chairman at last, 'if I might offer a suggestion, it is that we adjourn for luncheon—it is now two o'clock—and assemble here again. I regret that I cannot return myself, but I have no doubt Professor Conserve will be good enough to occupy the chair.'

There was a rattle of chairs, a drone of voices. The representatives fought their way into greatcoats. They conferred in little bunches. Gradually these dwindled and again Mr Jenner bent over the fire.

CHAPTER XVIII

I

LADY PENNINGTON, after a month of sustained calm with Miss Macadoo, was undecided whether she should call in the doctor or the vicar. Being a woman of broad sympathies she summoned both. To each in turn she spoke in her steady resonant voice of her material and spiritual symptoms which came, in truth, to much the same thing. A feeling of unaccountable uneasiness, a sense of nervous strain, a desire to find something she could not recall having lost. Looming there immense against the pearl sky and russet woods of Sussex, Lady Pennington unveiled with quiet composure, and absolute candour, those little medical touches which may or may not mean a very great deal, those mental and spiritual cravings which must surely point to some crisis of the soul. And each adviser reported in turn to Miss Macadoo in the drawing-room.

Dr Summers came quickly across the hall and greatly startled Miss Macadoo by appearing beside her before she heard the door close.

'I have seen Lady Pennington,' he said gravely.

Now Miss Macadoo was aware—who better?—that he had been with the dear patient for half an hour, had, in fact, been called in for that express purpose. But Dr Summers could not merely pronounce a commonplace like that but positively raise the hair of the next of kin as well.

'Not——?' broke out Miss Macadoo. 'Not——?'

Dr Summers was at his best in moments of domestic drama.

'Now, Miss Macadoo,' he said, laying a hand on her wrist, 'it is *essential* that you must compose yourself. In periods of illness any undue atmosphere of tension affects the patient. I know it. People sometimes say to me, "Doctor, when you come in I feel different. What is it?" "Well," I reply, "it's simply that I school my mind to think of pleasant, hopetul things." I lend some of my vitality to them.'

He paused and examined Miss Macadoo's pulse.

'Quite,' he said, 'just as I expected.'

It was suddenly beyond question to Miss Macadoo that Lady Pennington was even now *in extremis* upstairs with Mr Pinyon, and that she herself was falling the second victim to some dreadful and insidious epidemic.

Dr Summers seemed to hover between two fatal but conflicting diseases. Within a few brief minutes he had pumped every breath of hope and peace out of that sleeping Sussex drawing-room.

'You are not yourself,' he said with a note of severity. The unfortunate Miss Macadoo, being a middle-aged lady of inadequate private means and never much to look at, had not been herself since early youth and not much then. She bowed her head. Dr Summers, as always, was right in his diagnosis.

'I simply want to impress upon you the necessity of husbanding your strength. One patient at a time. If you do not we must have a nurse. Take things easily. Sleep well, live well, wear warm underclothing. Take a little wine. A little claret at luncheon, a little champagne at dinner——'

Again Dr Summers paused, and again Miss Macadoo had a curious instinct that this was the infinitely technical and skilful method by which clever people broke the

news. It was quite obvious poor Mary had succumbed upstairs.

'And now about Lady Pennington. I have seen her. I have had a little chat. I have examined her. . . .'

'And is she—is she——?' ventured Miss Macadoo.

'You are,' said Dr Summers, very detached and legal, 'an old friend——'

'Oh yes—I first met Mary . . .'

'I understand. Please be quite calm Miss Macadoo. Let the mind be quite slack. That's better. I find Lady Pennington has no *actual* symptoms sufficient to warrant an operation or other treatment as an immediate remedy. I am satisfied that there is no cause for anxiety at the moment.'

'I'm so relieved,' murmured Miss Macadoo. 'How silly of me. I began to think——'

'But I would be the last to say that there is nothing wrong with the patient. Please realise that. This may be a period of incubation. It may not. She complains of uneasiness, a certain amount of irritability—would you say irritability?'

Miss Macadoo lowered her head. She thought it unfriendly to let the words cross her lips, but most decidedly, oh dear, yes. . . .

'Very good. Here we have a lady of middle age, of good health and naturally cheerful disposition, who suddenly develops a melancholy outlook. Her life is quiet, comfortable, happy. She has your company, excellent domestics, her garden, her interests. What could be less likely to worry any one? In short, I am satisfied the line of treatment I am commencing to-day will promote a better state of things. I look forward to a very rapid change for the better. If not, then no harm has been done and it may become advisable—I say no more—to call in a second opinion. The great thing is

to keep her mind occupied. Play—talk to her—sing to her—arrange little surprises——'

A few minutes later the vibration of the doctor's car was audible on the drive, and Miss Macadoo was aware that the vicar was warming his hands at the drawing-room fire.

'I have seen dear Lady Pennington,' he said pensively.

Now Miss Macadoo was aware that Mr Pinyon was an old, a very close friend of dear Mary's, and that she would, being of High Church leanings, almost surely confide her inmost trepidations and secret alarms. Probably more even than to Dr Summers. . . . She was therefore prepared to hear the worst.

'I found the dear patient very low,' said Mr Pinyon, and mused in a silence intensified by the gentle travelling of shadows across the downs.

'Dr Summers said——' began Miss Macadoo, but something wistful in his face made the idea of Dr Summers crude and discordant.

'We had a very memorable half-hour,' resumed the vicar. 'I knew at once—I saw it whenever I entered the room——'

'What?' whispered Miss Macadoo, on edge.

'That Dr Summers, good fellow though he is, had upset her. He simply does not understand. There is a time, Miss Macadoo,' concluded Mr Pinyon, releasing a muted tenor, 'when doctors must stand aside——'

'Poor, poor Mary,' sobbed Miss Macadoo.

'I do not mean,' assured the vicar, laying a hand for a moment on her wrist, 'I do not mean Lady Pennington is bodily ill.'

The remark startled Miss Macadoo.

'Her mind,' she murmured. 'Oh, dear!'

'This is a time when it is essential you must be cheerful—quietly joyful. Let your light . . . You understand, I know. This is a time when you can help

me—you can do more—you can help Lady Pennington to cross the dark river——'

Miss Macadoo gave a faint yelp at that.

'——of the soul. There are seasons in the pilgrimage of life when absolute quiet and meditation is imperative.'

'Dr Summers said——'

'*Please.* I would not on any account dispute a medical opinion. But I have my own duty—a duty of the spirit. In Lady Pennington I am aware of an uneasiness, a searching out into thorny places which may to the uninitiated appear almost like irritability—a profound melancholy. Am I not right?'

'Dr Summers said so too.'

'*Please,*' said Mr Pinyon again. 'I search for a material and positive explanation. There is none. She enjoys your friendship, she is waited upon by both Martha and Mary, so to speak, she has her flowers, her several activities. No. In the course of a half-hour which revealed to me very tenderly the singular beauty of the dear lady's character, her close touch with things not temporal—I was convinced that a period of absolute isolation, a retreat, in short, would return her to us, restored, strengthened, at peace. I will send you some little books of consolation for dark hours such as these——'

A few minutes later the rattle of the vicar's pony cart was audible on the drive, and Miss Macadoo was aware that she was in charge of dear Mary, that she must keep her alone but cheerful, quiet but lively, comforted but electrified.

II

In the library Lady Pennington accepted a cup of tea and was uncertain whether she had the heart to toy with a muffin. The curtains were drawn, the Sussex night left to look after itself, the oak logs upon the fire

sizzling pleasantly, the cat in profound slumber. People write about afternoons like that. Verses are published.

But Lady Pennington was indifferent. She even regarded the pensive figure of Miss Macadoo assiduously chewing a muffin with impatience.

'If only I knew what was the matter with me,' she remarked aloud.

Miss Macadoo wondered whether she should sing or read a thoughtful bit out of St Francis.

'There's nothing the matter with you, dear,' lacked nothing in candour, assurance, and good intention, but even Miss Macadoo realised it was perhaps unfortunate.

'It is simply foolish to say that, Anne. If there is nothing the matter with me, why am I lying here? Why has Dr Summers been this morning and telephoned this afternoon?'

'I meant, to be anxious about,' amended Miss Macadoo hurriedly. '*I'm* not anxious—not a scrap, dear. Shall I sing to you a little?'

'No,' reverberated Lady Pennington with very natural indignation. 'You surprise me a little, Anne.'

Miss Macadoo recalled the words of Dr Summers, the counsel of Mr Pinyon. She must not be disconcerted by the petulance of illness.

'I must be getting old,' moaned Lady Pennington. 'I seem to have lost my touch with life.'

'The vicar,' began Miss Macadoo, 'said some beautiful things about the next world. He brings it very near.'

'I used to think the war had broadened him,' said the patient with vague resentment.

'Could you not sleep a little,' suggested Miss Macadoo, 'perhaps if I played that sad tune—the one with the tolling in the bass——'

'I think,' interrupted Lady Pennington, 'that's the postman's ring.'

'Possibly a letter from Pandora. How regularly she has written. Every day, isn't it?'

There was no answer from the couch.

'Though it is a pity she says so little. But, of course, nothing ever happens in a Government Office, does it?'

Still a deep, abiding silence from the couch.

'But she might tell you about her home life with her uncle,' pursued Miss Macadoo, heaping on, with the wonderful persistence of the well-intentioned, coals of fire. 'They must be happy, of course.' (This dubiously.)

Lady Pennington had never imagined less excuse for that ridiculous 'of course.' Every instinct, every faculty, every natural intuition of a mother's heart had whispered, warned, shouted, that everything must, simply *must*, be all wrong. And she knew nothing. Absolutely nothing. For a month she had received sweet, if brief, little notes from Pandora saying how cold it was, or how busy she was, or how well everything was going, but a breath of news, real news, news with a bite in it—*never*.

She was ignored. She did not count. And there was Richard, her brother-in-law. Had he written? Certainly. Several times. Charming notes asking for her news and covering one sheet. Nothing about Pandora. Nothing about that young Fullerton whom she had heard—quite accidentally—not from Pandora, oh dear, no, was actually working at the Ministry—a most unsuitable appointment for Richard to have sanctioned in view of the fact that the boy had not a penny to his credit, and, she gathered, very prospective prospects indeed.

'The post, my lady,' said the hushed voice of a parlourmaid.

'Mary dear, shall I take charge of them?' from Miss Macadoo.

No, Mary dear had every intention of minding her own affairs and wished other people to do the same.

There were four letters. She recognised Pandora's enerous scrawl—a thin envelope—at once. There were wo fattish envelopes and a bill. She drew the lamp a ittle closer and read Pandora's first. It said that the unset over the Thames as she was writing in Uncle Richard's study was so gorgeous that no words could ttempt to express it. No words did. Pandora closed with love. Taking a decided turn for the worse Lady Pennington ran a dejected finger down the other two. She read them in turn, and as she read she seemed to gain in immensity, to loom larger and larger against the book-case behind the couch, to be rejuvenated, to get tone.

'MY DEAR MARY'—(began the first)—'It is so very long since I have written to you that you will be saying "Now who in the world is this?" Well, it's your old friend Pamela Wellcome, now Pamela Craig, who has left her schooldays so far behind her as to boast of a son who is nearly thirty and a husband who has just received a baronetcy for his work on the Press. . . .'

'Same affected little snob,' snorted Lady Pennington.

'. . . But that simply in passing. I am writing you about—what do you think?' ('Odious woman,' breathed Lady Pennington). 'About Michael, my son, and your little Pandora——'

A sound like an incoming tide roared in the invalid's brain.

'I am just as surprised and may I add delighted as I am sure and hope you will be. It seems almost like the work of an *UNSEEN HAND*. Your girl and my boy. *What* a romance ! ! !'

'Anne,' said Lady Pennington abruptly, 'I think I'm going to be sick.'

'It is often the wisest course,' comforted Miss Macadoo, speeding about.

'I'm better,' said the invalid abruptly. 'Yes, the smelling salts. Thank you. I will be all right in a minute if I am left quite alone.'

At the closing of the door upon the departure of Miss Macadoo, Lady Pennington prepared herself for whatever might befall. Out of the silence had come thunder.

'I simply don't know where to begin, or what you know, or whether you knew all along. Michael says he has a kind of instinct that he will spar terribly with his new mother-in-law ! ! ! I told him all about the time you tore your stocking—you remember——' ('If I did remember,' snarled Lady Pennington heavily, 'I'd have the decency to forget.') 'Pandora must, of course, have told you about Michael working at the Ministry, and how they positively *floundered* in love at first sight. Too funny ! Of course I had to keep serious about it, but two children more suited I never imagined existed. But a solemn warning, my dear. They are not actually technically engaged yet. So no one even *suspects*. Oh, dear me, no. And now, my dear, joking apart——' ('joking,' echoed Lady Pennington with a ghastly smile), 'joking apart, both Donald and I are simply *delighted*. Donald never actually met your husband but he often longed to and he has a growing affection for your brother-in-law at the Ministry. He is helping them along all he can, and although these are early days he says (not a word, my dear) that all is not too well with it. Apparently the Minister is falling out with Mr Winterton. However, all that later. We'll have plenty of time to hold our little conclave while the young people say the old nothings in a corner——'

'Pandora saying old nothings!' echoed Lady Pennington, scornfully. '*Pandora!*'

'——Come and see us *at once*. I have not told Pan. I've asked you to come as a surprise. She's dining here the day after to-morrow. What a joke it would be. Donald and I would *roar*——'

Lady Pennington permitted the letter to fall upon her lap. The words 'Donald and I would roar' continued a kind of recitative in her brain. How long would they roar? Or how soon would their roar take on quite a different note?

But Pandora. At it again. This must be the twenty-second mother who had flung a letter out of the unknown. Two had been very nice mothers, some impossible, most meaningless. Upstairs, somewhere, she had preserved their letters—a good round bundle. They seldom had written more than one each. There had been no occasion. Two had corresponded for about a fortnight and then talked about proceedings. She had seen some of the young men. They struck her as quite pleasant, presentable young men, but they were not up to Pandora, who always saw so much more in them than any single young man could carry about, and then when she discovered the empty places in the hold, was overwhelmed by panic and the terror that there was no cargo aboard at all. It was hard on the young men, but they all took it well. And Pandora never deserted them altogether. She always found them interesting at intervals. 'I hope you won't be shocked,' Pandora once said intelligently to the vicar, being fourteen at the time, 'but what I would like so much is an occasional husband.' Her hopes were dashed. The vicar was shocked.

'I suppose I must write her,' mused Lady Pennington. 'Perhaps I can explain Pandora. No—nobody could

ever hope to explain that girl. But I can at least clear myself. *I* know nothing. And I shall write to Pandora *at once*. There are several things I would like to say. It is time——' Aroused, and already gaining strength and resolution, Lady Pennington turned quite briskly to the other letter. Again the handwriting was familiar, but nothing more.

'MY DEAR LADY PENNINGTON.—You will recall our pleasant holiday, shared and brightened so very greatly by the companionship of your husband and yourself. I refer, of course, to the fortnight at Littlehampton in the year before the War. I have often intended writing to you, but the War and the taxes on one's time have always prevented me. As you are probably aware, my husband and, in a very small way I, too, have tried to do what we can for the general good and national progress in these days of upheaval. But the work is terribly uphill. There is a spirit of unrest abroad that will not accept leadership, though if any leader was likely to be followed it would be the General. And apart from this lack of organised effort there are these dreadful Government Departments. There is a general impression that all is not as it might be in some of these offices, but no one would credit the amazing obstruction and hopeless confusion and waste that prevails. One hopes as each new department is established that *something*, however little, will be accomplished, and at least that the money of the ratepayers will not be *squandered*, positively SQUANDERED, on *huge staffs* of overpaid girls and idle young men——'

('A subscription for something,' thought Lady Pennington gloomily.)

'Now, I am not going to worry you, that is the last

thing I would dream of doing. But I have recently had some correspondence with the new Ministry of Recreation. I may say, three months ago, no one could have hoped more from that wonderful idea than the General and myself. It seemed like a promised land. A New England. . . . But is it? Is it not being strangled slowly to death by officialdom. I wonder. However, that's beside the point. I am writing to you to ask whether you will be so kind as to give me an introduction to your brother-in-law who is, of course, Permanent Secretary. So far my letters to the Minister have been ignored, and some one called James Fullerton'—('Ah!' said Lady Pennington, pointedly, 'that Fullerton,')—'has *persisted*, simply to obstruct matters, in holding up the file. So much I know by *private channels*. I am sure your brother-in-law has simply no idea of the things people are saying *everywhere* about the Ministry and how it will not last till Christmas. He would be *astounded*. A retired admiral told me in strict confidence over tea yesterday that he had been told under oath of secrecy by a man who was seated at the next table to Mr Winterton at the club that he (Mr Winterton) said, or rather, to be quite accurate, conveyed by a *meaning look*, that the days of John Humbleford are numbered. You will, of course keep this to yourself. One does not want the *People* chattering, however much the rest of us who love our country may be disturbed. I may add I called in person at this Ministry, and as no one was there to show me upstairs I just went up and was spoken to most rudely by a minx of a girl with large horn spectacles in a room with at least sixteen young men.' ('Pandora,' groaned Lady Pennington. How wonderful is the insight of a mother's heart!) 'She was enjoying herself, I'll warrant, but it *must stop*. Now I know you will help me. It only requires a little note to your brother-in-law and there may yet be time. If

nothing can be done, my husband is quite determined to *reveal everything in the Press*, and stop this dry rot.

'I wonder could you come to town and then we might have a chance of renewing our friendship.

'With kindest remembrances from my husband,

'Yours very sincerely,

'LEONORA BOULTER.'

'*So that's it*,' said Lady Pennington, but with a significance, a feeling, and a resolution that gave the words the background of big drama. Her eyes fell upon Pandora's little note chirruping about the sunset. The last of quite thirty similar little emblems of a dutiful child. With rising indignation she tore it into fragments, and leaving the couch walked with an active step and a high colour to the bell.

'I want Miss Macadoo,' she said, with a rich note that had suffered an eclipse during the last three weeks.

'Anne,' remarked Lady Pennington, standing, a terrific figure with a hapless shawl still clinging to her skirt. 'Anne—I leave for London to-morrow.'

She passed with splendid poise, and crossing the hall, went steadily, tremendously, up the stairs to her room.

CHAPTER XIX

I

'You should be firm, James, dearest,' said Mrs Fullerton, 'you said last night——'

'I remember, as it were in some previous existence, that last night we dined together at the Carlton, a place we can only afford to read about in novels. I am perfectly ready to believe I said a lot of glowing things, spoke of my official position, which, at the present moment, is being fought by Establishment and will certainly be ignored by the Treasury, of my salary which I have never yet clutched, of my future and the life of quiet ease I shall lead when I am married—I said all that I suppose?'

'You did say——'

'Of course I did say. And I meant it. I believed it. I hate the terrible, the humiliating rememberance which faces one at breakfast with the day's work waiting round the corner. It was not simply the champagne. It was not only that admirable pheasant. No. It is an enormous conspiracy of taxis, evening dress, waiters, lights. . . . Had we sat here with that degenerate fire, the strange immemorial smell of this room, and Grandmamma upstairs, how much nearer the awful desert of truth would we have crawled.'

'Possibly no nearer, James, dearest. Tell me, is that egg high?'

'I don't know. I'm too worried to notice. But surely we would have come right up against facts. It's facts that elude one over coffee and cognac. One's sense of

responsibility is anæsthetised. Like Uncle John. He is the happiest, the most fortunate of men. He cannot credit things as they really are. He lives spiritually, just as though he were injected at intervals with essence of fizz.'

'James, do let me boil you another.'

'I tell you I am content. What I am getting at is this: I am living, you are living, and certainly Pandora and Uncle John are living, in a country of the blind. It simply can't go on. It doesn't. People sometimes delude themselves into the notion that something will turn up.'

'Please,' begged Mrs Fullerton, 'remember, James, how bright and happy you were last night. So was I. I don't want to be selfish, dearest, but think of me sitting here all day. Don't be more depressing than you need be. I wondered as I was dressing——'

'Yes?'

'Whether that sweet—that soufflé surprise——'

'The things I am talking about have nothing at all to do with food,' he replied with restraint. 'Why is it I cannot get you or Pandora or Uncle John to face facts?'

'What facts, dear?' asked Mrs Fullerton with resignation.

'I was saying,' resumed James, 'that last night I spoke of the Ministry as a kind of haven from whence one could put out to sea.'

'Do you notice, darling, you're beginning to talk like Uncle John? But don't let me interrupt you.'

'I am coming down to solid earth again. What is the position? I am spending my days receiving and having carted away Lady Boulter's file. It is growing. It has come to stay. It will in time sack me or I will be sacked. I see daily a queue of people interested in that file or in the Boulters. I am recognised already as the only man who is an authority on the Boulter file. There was one in the War Office, but he is out of date. As the file

concerns half a dozen Government Departments, I am repeatedly hurrying down Whitehall, in drenching rain, to confer with somebody about a point which is of no mortal interest to anybody save Lady Boulter. I tell you the thing is growing. It is gaining in circumference, ferocity, and cold determination. I have misdirected that file, I have had it conveyed in a cab to the most distant offices, I have even made overtures to the messenger. But it is too tremendous.'

'Surely you exaggerate, James.'

'No,' he said heavily, 'however much it sounds like the Arabian Nights, this fantasy is there. It will be waiting for me when I take off my hat. It is like an elemental. . . . But however sickening that may be, there are the other things—things which do not ruffle Pandora or Uncle John. Or you——' he added sombrely.

'There's the rain again,' murmured Mrs Fullerton. 'Please leave me out as much as you can, dear. I have to do the household books with Grandmamma, and I want to keep what little spirits I have left.'

'I don't mind the things people are beginning to say about the Ministry. That can't be helped. If it has to come, well and good. But I'm sick of the Boulters, and I'm tired of spending my life listening to other people. They sneak in and sit down and tell me things. They always did and they always will. And I've no escape now. From all over the Ministry they come to me. Why? If any person could answer that question, and enclose a remedy, I'd send him a cheque. Quite vaguely —a cheque. It would be worth it. I'm bored for hours on end. It is dreadful the things people reveal. Jealousies, rumours, gossip. Talking aloud. Not to me. They don't want my advice. They simply must slide into somebody's room and get rid of it all. And they come to me. They always come to me.'

'But that's not a very dreadful worry, James. You must lock your door and make a stand.'

'You simply don't know what you're talking about,' he said patiently, 'you don't think they come in for a chat, do you? They come to discuss a point. They arrive carrying a file which they usually leave on my table. But things are narrowing in. I want to strike out before it is too late. Why could one not, with a little initiative of a practical kind, float a little business in which you, Pandora, Uncle John, and I could take refuge when the Ministry goes.'

'My dear boy.'

'I know all about that. I know there's no money. I admit that has not evaded me. But what else can we do? Uncle John is broke—always was—always will be. He's splendidly in debt. Pandora's little parties which are such a terrific social success are costing her about a hundred a week, and when the cash is finished she's finished too. I alone am solvent, and I have, as you know, about three hundred a year. There is, you rightly observed, the financial side. But surely something should be done to keep us all from going bust. In any case I am going to marry Pandora, and I have a kind of instinct that the time is drawing near. She will require a home. There is you. It is high time you left St John's Wood. There is no law compelling people to live in St John's Wood, and I see us all in a pleasant country house near enough to town to enable Uncle John and I to run up to our business. He will make an excellent top dressing, especially if we formed a company, and I do the dirty—I mean I will supervise the clerical side and the accounts.'

'It would be wonderful,' said Mrs Fullerton, with genuine enthusiasm. 'I like that idea of the house in the country. We would sell our fruit and vegetables and eggs, and motor to meet your train in the evenings.

Then what little dinners we'd have in the garden on summer evenings.'

'Uncle John is set on a house now. That is one of the little problems I am faced with to-day. But if it could be our house then the matter could be readjusted later.'

'How far you look ahead, James,' said Mrs Fullerton, with admiration.

'One must look ahead,' he replied, a little moved himself.

'But as you see, to marry Pandora one must have prospects. To take this house one must have money.'

'Money—oh, yes.'

'Of course—money. Now, how does one get money?'

His mother waited. They both sat in a profound, an intimate silence.

'My idea,' said James, clearing his throat, 'is, I think, not unreasonable.' He paused, overcome by its stupendous irrationality. 'My idea,' he resumed, lighting a cigarette with an air, 'involves Grandmamma.' The word 'involves' was perhaps unhappy, but it was the grandmamma part which sent a sudden chill through the room.

'I think,' said James, puffing vigorously, 'I think we have treated Grandmamma rather badly.'

'James!'

'We have neglected her. We have left that old lady to struggle along with commercial problems just as though there was not a man in the house. I am strongly in favour of inviting Grandmamma to take an interest in this proposed business of ours.'

'But she simply wouldn't, dear. She'd be furious at the very suggestion.'

'Then how far can we permit her to adopt such a hectoring attitude? Is an ancient person like that to be allowed to juggle with the estate as she pleases. I don't believe it. There must be a clause in law somewhere——'

'You don't mean you'd compel Grandmamma?'

'My dear mother, I'm a desperate man. I'm rather more dangerous than a burglar because I have a sense of moral right. I intend to marry Pandora. I want money. You desire to live your life. Uncle John finds it necessary from time to time to pay hard cash in order that he may remain at liberty. Upstairs is a very old, a very unlovable, a very unnecessary old person. She remains, and while she sits above we all live the quiet, ruminating, quite futile, lives of moles below. Our hair goes, our eyes grow dim, our sense of happiness falters. We cannot marry or propagate or do any of the things the Bible is keen about. That is the position. What is the solution? A bomb? No. There are several excellent reasons why a bomb should be ruled out at once. Her inevitable end? It has been inevitable for nearly a quarter of a century. We are faint with the vigil. What's more, the super-tax, the Profiteering Act, the Unearned Income Bill—what will not these things achieve? One's patriotism blenches at the very thought. And with a Labour Government it is doubtful if all balances at the bank will not be grabbed for the general beano. Is that not a fair, a sensible view of the situation? Are not honest men all over the country facing with homicidal calm these grim, these painful facts?'

'But, James, dear, even supposing Grandmamma gave us each the amount we'll get some day, it might still be taken as unearned income?'

'I think not,' he said quietly, 'it would take too long to explain. But I think not.'

'And if Grandmamma refuses? Simply says "No"?'

'That would, I admit, create a difficult situation. But I do not despair. I am of the opinion we have gone the wrong way about it with Grandmamma. We have been so damned dependent. We have put our cards on the table. All the time. This is an age of psychology. We

ask Grandmamma. She refuses. What if we don't ask her? What if we tantalise her? What if we are richer than she is? What if we don't want her money?'

'*Dearest!* Or are you only speaking like Uncle John?'

'I mean,' he said, 'that there are ways. When Grandmamma is left here alone, when she comes to spend a week with us in the country, when she *sees* money being tossed about in careless thousands—*sees*, you mark—she will never be asked to finance anything or take shares or anything so crude. And Pandora will be there.'

'But, James, this all sounds like a gigantic swindle.'

'Diplomacy,' he replied gaily, 'merely diplomacy. And who knows whether Grandmamma is not really turning to higher things?'

Almost as an answer to prayer he saw Martha standing in the doorway.

'Mistress wishes to know would Master James read this and see about it.'

'A little point upon which Grandmamma wishes my advice,' he said aloud, and exchanged a meaning, a triumphant glance with his mother. There followed a considerable silence. A passage in the middle of the page was generously marked in red ink. It read:—

'Dr Serge Voronoff says, "Physical and moral vigour can be restored to old people by grafting on them the interstitial glands of monkeys."'

II

It was as he had foreseen. On his table sprawled the Boulter file. The day had opened badly. It promised to maintain, as days will, a steady drizzle of disaster. His attention was drawn to a letter from an M.P. who desired to be advised upon certain questions brought to his notice by Lady Boulter, questions which he stated

he was most anxious should not be raised in the House until the Ministry had been afforded an opportunity of making what he felt confident would prove a satisfactory rejoinder. . . . Nothing pricks a Ministry so sharply as the veiled threat of Parliamentary questions. What the M.P. really wished to know was whether he had a sporting chance of exposing a grave scandal and being reported with proper publicity in the Press. That is the purpose of M.P.'s. What the Ministry must succeed in doing was to reply just as though the very idea of a grave scandal could not possibly be entertained for a moment by an M.P. of Mr Blank's unparalleled public service and unequalled political horizon. There were occasions when an official interview might placate Mr Blank. There were times when the Minister must meet him accompanied by the Parliamentary Secretary and, over a pleasant luncheon, laugh the troublesome little idea away. And, again, upon very hopeless occasions, considerable public support had been won by a bluff confession of error, an appeal to the sense of fair play due to a Ministry understaffed and struggling under the burden of critical national problems. It was then that Mr Blank looked extremely small and even a traitor to his country in the eyes of the world. Nothing was more bracing than a straightforward attack like that carried out in the heart of the enemy's country. It acted as an astringent medicine. But it could only be prescribed at wide intervals of time.

James decided to see Mr Blank.

There were several files dealing with various complaints affecting other departments in the Ministry. They were directed to him in view of his official position as the soother of troubled waters. It was his duty to take up the matter with the persons responsible for charges ranging from gross carelessness to imbecility and reply with the utmost courtesy and evasion. There were two conferences which might keep him for solid

hours. There would be, as the day was fine, a host of callers, many of them elderly ladies with parcels of letters, extracts from their local papers, and the gift of interminable speech. These asked no questions, they hungered for no decision or recommendation. They had not come for any particular purpose and when they were exhausted they left and returned to their unknown sleeping places, to emerge with renewed strength on the morrow. There would be local magnates, very influential and succulent, who talked with the authority and steady rhetoric of City Councils. There would be clergymen of all denominations who were convinced that if funds were provided schemes of social welfare could be organised and they understood the Government had voted a great sum of money. . . . The official announcement of that grant was no sooner public than from the most remote and inaccessible ends of the country men set out by sea and land, strong thoughtful men, aflame for the cause of national recreation and the kingdom of heaven. They came to James with schemes for the herring industry in the lonely north, schemes only needing a few hundred thousands, they came with plans of establishing cinema theatres to improve the soul of Wigan, they passed in a procession from Euston to Whitehall, and they eyed each other in the waiting-room with untempered hatred and contempt. There were singers who had lost their voices, or had not developed them, actors who felt it a duty to act, and an elderly gentleman with chronic stomach trouble who said some medical treatment would restore a sense of relief, if not actually recreation, to at least one household in this England. 'This England' was the note they all struck with an ease, a self-possession, an absence of reticence which was overwhelming. In the face of such absolute altruism it seemed churlish to refuse. But they took it very calmly. They were wonderfully

stoical. They nodded, packed away their graft, and returned to the wilderness.

III

What James was wondering, as he sat alone with the Minister was exactly why his time was being wasted so long and so spaciously. Admitted that John Humbleford was always spacious—he was at any rate splendidly obvious. A child could catch the drift of his coloured periods. But at eleven o'clock, with the Boulter M.P. probably waiting in his room and files being abandoned every hour on his desk, he did wish the Minister would get to business. But John Humbleford, pacing up and down the carpet, and when he was not staring very hard out of the window, staring equally hard at James, spoke of incidents in his youth, and laughed reminiscently and fondly over the preposterous age of his marriage and said he was fortunate to have met James's Aunt Ethel, and how perhaps it was better she had not been spared to undertake the heavy social duties of a Minister's wife.

'During these last few weeks,' said John Humbleford pensively, 'I have asked myself, "Would Ethel have cared about it?" The answer has always been in the negative.'

To James this seemed to hover on the fringe of psychic phenomena, but he was only too glad to admit his uncle might be right.

'And yet more and more it has been thrust upon me that the official side of a position such as I hold is not all or nearly all. One dare not ignore the enormous importance of the social atmosphere. More than that; I go further and say that it is my growing conviction,' said the Minister, speaking with great force and staring even harder at James, 'that I would fail in my duty to

the nation if I underestimated or simply blinded myself to the obligations of the public post I have the honour to hold.'

'Certainly,' said James, very anxious to agree with everything.

'But you perceive at once how I am placed. You see the little obstacle.'

'Naturally,' said James. 'Out of the question.'

He was surprised by the blaze of honest indignation which encompassed the Minister.

'What do you mean by your "out of the question"? What's out of the question?'

'You don't mean,' said James, profoundly moved, 'that you contemplate marriage?'

The Minister, who had been regarding him without affection for some little time, struggled with feelings beyond the range of speech. Then he saw light.

'Forgive me, James,' he said. 'I understand.'

'I was taken by surprise,' murmured James, at a loss.

'Your Aunt Ethel,' murmured the Minister, 'of course. I forgot.'

'There's no harm done,' said James thankfully.

'I must seem a brute,' said the Minister.

'Not at all.' He felt he could afford to be magnanimous. After all, he'd never seen his Aunt. He looked upon the carpet and prayed that the idea of Uncle John getting married would seem quite a natural sort of thing to happen. Why not?

'I hardly know what to say,' mumbled Uncle John, who had not taken the Aunt Ethel side to heart.

'Say nothing,' assisted James, flushed a little with an inspired memory of the good books of youth. 'I have a feeling she would be glad.'

Uncle John looked less crushed at once.

'So have I, James,' he said. 'So have I. Curious you said that. I had a dream last night.'

('God,' said James, and felt the hair tingle on his brow.)

'She came up to her,' went on the Minister, speaking without clarity, 'she went up to her and smiled.'

James gave the right kind of nod. The picture of two elderly Christian matrons advancing towards one another with Uncle John poised in the background impressed him. He blew his nose.

'I should have mentioned it sooner,' resumed the Minister, 'I made too much of the official aspect, which came second.'

'I can well imagine,' said James pleasantly. 'I suppose one may not ask——?'

'Not yet, James. Not yet. But for herself and—er—officially, I know—I am dead sure you will like her.'

'So am I. I have a kind of funny instinct I know her already,' lied James, as the clock struck twelve.

'Perhaps you do, my boy,' laughed the Minister, with what seemed to James exaggerated humour, 'have a guess.'

James let his mind run over all the elderly women, mutual to them both. Suddenly he saw light. Mrs Jacobson. One of those immense fat women of forty-nine.

'Has she grown-up children?' he asked cunningly.

The Minister ceased to smile. To James's horror he commenced to display alarming symptoms. No Aunt Ethel could help him now. He must break new ground.

'Pandora——' began James hurriedly, but got no further.

At that word—at that name—the Minister behaved very strangely. He rushed straight at James. He overwhelmed him. He shook his hand, he smacked him on the back.

'You rascal,' he cried, 'you'd pull my leg, would you—you and your grown-up children, eh?'

'He knows,' confessed James to himself, 'all about Pandora and me.'

Rather elated, and exchanging beaming smiles with his clever old uncle, he resumed.

'Pandora,' he began again, 'has an idea that a country house would do the trick.'

'Didn't I say so?' echoed the Minister.

'And who could make a better hostess?' James begged to know.

'Who indeed? My boy, what an actor you'd make. And you came here with this all cut and dried.'

'Yes, but of course things will be a little different now.'

'Eh?'

'When you're married. Pandora and I were simply planning, you see.'

'Then go on planning, my boy. We three won't fall out.'

'Temporarily, the scheme for the social side should prove successful. Later of course—well, what about it?'

'I don't quite catch you, James, but do you mean when I'm married?'

'Well, yes. You see the house in my scheme was to be ours—that is Pandora's, yours, and mine.'

'It will be still, James. Married or single, we'll all live there.'

'But Mrs Humbleford?'

The Minister could hardly contain himself at such a stroke.

'She and Pandora will be *inseparable,*' he said, and advancing permitted himself to punch James in the chest, '*inseparable,*' he repeated with a bravura, a gusto, a steady and even rising enjoyment which was quite amazing.

'My idea,' continued James, struggling manfully to shore, 'was partly departmental—partly practical.'

'What do you mean by practical?'

'It was financial. I thought, in view of any developments in the future, we might interest ourselves in Grandmamma. I mean interest Grandmamma in us—that is to say I feel rather badly about Grandmamma.'

'I've felt that way for a quarter of a century,' remarked the Minister with feeling.

'I know. But have you ever tried to win her affections?'

'No, I can't say I have. What's more I don't think you'll ever make a Dickens' scene out of Grandmamma.'

'I only want to ask her down.'

'She wouldn't come.'

'She will if she isn't asked.'

'James,' said the Minister, 'you move on a higher intellectual plane than I. If you understand what you mean yourself, go ahead, my boy.'

'It only remains to take the country house.'

'That's all. There's nothing like getting to business at once. Near London, James, but not too near. A place with a past. A rambling old-world garden. Paddocks. A drive with a lodge. Panelled rooms. Roses. A view—must have a view. And furnished. My furniture,' said the Minister thoughtfully, 'is—well—in fact, my things are too——'

'Too modern,' assisted James loyally.

'That's it,' said the Minister, with considerable relief, 'too modern.'

'And the rent?'

'Anything in reason,' said the Minister airily, 'but if you get a list we'll take the car and have a day off. We'll go to-morrow. See about it, James. And to-night we'll have a jollification. Dinner and theatre. You—myself—and——'

James waited.

'A certain young lady,' said the Minister, with positive glee, and suddenly shutting down all private and

personal data, after the Whisperley school, pursed his lips, looked grave, and remarked distantly, 'By the way, I have certain little readjustments of staff under consideration. We are getting very short of accommodation, and I feel I must not stand out when even Pennington has his secretary in his room. It is a nuisance, because one must be perfectly satisfied of the discretion of the person selected. My secretary, Miss Jeffries, would, I fear, be hardly suitable. Now, I wonder, Fullerton' (they were well back on the Fullerton ground), 'I wonder, Fullerton, if you cannot recommend the kind of person I require,' concluded the Minister, with that quiet absence of any curiosity whatever, which is so lowering in high officials.

James felt it, but the whole matter struck him as insignificant and a little departmental padding to finish up with.

'You could not have a better man than——'

'Don't want men,' grunted the Minister briefly.

'Then Mrs Perriewinkle.'

'Ridiculous name. No time for names like that.'

'Mrs Robins.'

'Married women are always a nuisance, and tell their husbands everything.'

James ran his mind over those elderly, plain, and competent ladies who are to be found in far more considerable numbers in Government offices than poetry or the Press will sanction.

'I know,' he said with triumph.

'Good,' remarked the Minister with noticeable calm.

'Miss Eliman.'

The Minister, as James was fully cognisant, had no knowledge of the lady. But he went into the wilderness and returned.

'My dear Fullerton,' he said, with a good-humoured laugh, 'I ask you, would you sit for preference in this

room facing Miss Eliman? Besides, her French is not good enough.'

'Her French?' echoed James. 'You never mentioned French.'

'Didn't I? Of course, she must know French. And Italian. But only slightly. Just a touch of Italian.'

'She simply doesn't exist,' said James with some irritation. 'You require a young secretary, good looking——'

'Looks don't matter.'

'But you said so.'

'I want work. I only said I drew the line at Miss Eliman.'

'Oh, well. She must be discreet, competent, unmarried. Supposing she's engaged?'

'What,' asked the Minister largely, 'does that matter to me?'

'Right. And know French and Italian. I'm sorry, but you'll have to advertise.'

'Not if she is in the Ministry, Fullerton. You admit there is not a moment to be lost?'

'I mean that, of course.'

'Then you agree with me. And yet it seems a pity. She is doing good work.'

The Minister walked away. He went over to the far window. He lowered his head suddenly as though a cab-horse had collapsed in the street below.

'Miss Pennington,' he said.

There was a pause, in which the Minister appeared to have sighted another cab-horse towards the Abbey.

To James, after a hasty, absurd, but blinding suspicion, there could be no shadow of doubt that the proposal was providential. None whatever. However much he derided the idea of Michael Craig or any of the heroic band who obeyed Pandora with dog-like devotion, it was surely to be desired that without his previous

knowledge or advice she should be isolated for a while with Uncle John who was thinking of marrying himself. What could be safer? Or had, by any chance, Uncle John arranged it all with a definite purpose? Had he heard rumours that Michael Craig . . . It was like the thoughtful old fellow. . . . Dear Uncle John.

The Minister, satisfied the horse was on its feet, turned quite jauntily and said 'Well?'

'I think,' said James, 'it is a capital idea. Nothing better. Can't imagine why the idea never occurred to me before.'

The Minister was quite carried away. He expressed his official satisfaction in a boyish note which struck James at the time as—well, a little peculiar. The balancing of that apple on his nose, for instance. Good hearted, simple, innocent. All that. But just a bit childish. However . . .

'That's settled then,' caroled the Minister, 'and now take the day off, James. Let's study those houses to-night. And to-morrow. Is it going to be fine? I believe it is——'

James was one of those clever, philosophical people who are not deceived by demonstrations of hysterics, sobs, or simply blind, tearing rage. He was not of those who simply leave the street, when such demonstrations are public property. He searched for motives. He knew at once why Uncle John was behaving like the star man in the Southern Syncopated Orchestra. He went up to him.

'I believe,' he said, strongly moved himself, 'that you arranged this for a definite reason. Am I right?'

Strong, simple words that took the Minister aback. He looked extremely foolish, as all philanthropists by stealth are pledged to do. He stammered. He smoothed his hair.

'I see you did,' went on James, taking the strong line. I *know* you did.'

'Well, what if I did?' asked the Minister, rallying a little.

'It won't be for long, anyway,' said James, laughing happily.

'No,' shouted the Minister, with evident relief, 'by Jingo, it won't!'

They parted, exchanging the intimate, the respectful glances of men engaged upon some high adventure, the sharers of some romantic secret.

CHAPTER XX

I

JAMES had no sooner entered his room than the dark, Byronic, the long, mediæval face of Michael Craig appeared. He carried a file, but there was no sense of preservation in that. By the thoughtful way he closed the door it was obvious he had come for one of those quiet little talks which, in expensive biographies, turn the trend of history and direct the immortal soul of man.

'May I come in?' he asked, in his low, rather melancholy voice.

'I'm awfully rushed,' said James, making busy noises with files. 'Just sit down, Craig.' He pressed the bell.

'Miss Job,' he said, 'I have been held up at a conference with the Minister this morning, and I have to rush off in a moment for the afternoon. To-morrow, the Minister wishes me to go out of town with him.' He paused, the picture of official stress. 'Now, these letters. I'll dictate them in a minute, or could you acknowledge them and bring forward the file on Wednesday. First thing, mind. Don't let me get snowed under. But the Boulter file. Oh . . .' It was there. It was always there, like a primitive faith. That letter from Lady Boulter—the last one. It was peculiarly foolish, packed with inaccuracies, abusive, threatening.

'I simply have not time,' wailed James aloud. 'I really think——'

The eyes of Michael Craig, that brilliant contemporary, were on him. The bleak, forty-eight-shilling (plus Peace

bonus) stare of Miss Job held out no helping hand. They waited, these underlings, for his decision. He was suddenly satisfied that he must not be badgered. Not before people.

'Ask Mr Makepeace,' he said, 'to reply. Tell him I think it advisable to adopt a stronger line with Lady Boulter. Let the answer be brief and to the point.'

'Yes, sir.'

'Craig, just give me a hand, will you?'

Together they staggered with the file into the next room.

'There is a matter I feel I ought to speak about,' said Craig, when the door had closed upon Miss Job. He stood leaning against the mantelpiece regarding James with a gaze unmistakably confidential and intense.

'Oh, yes,' said James. It was five to one, and the morning had gone for ever.

'It is a personal matter,' added Craig, with a poignant air.

It was always a personal matter with him. The number of hours spent by James in past years in the company of Craig's yearnings, doubts, and spiritual upliftings, must have totted up into solid months. He cast a haunted eye over his desk. Apparently everything was either 'Immediate' (in green), or 'Urgent' (in red), or 'Minister' or 'Permanent Secretary.' The entire business of the British Empire seemed to be concentrated before him.

'Files,' said James foolishly, 'are about the only things which are never rationed.'

Craig permitted himself a faint smile. Again the pensive silence fell gently over the room, and the clock struck one.

James was conscious of hunger.

'Shall we lunch?' he suggested with misgiving.

'With me?' said Craig.

'I'll meet you at your club.'

'At half-past. You know my pot-house?'

Yes, James had very excellent reasons for knowing it. He nodded, and took refuge in officialdom.

'I say, Craig, just ask Miss Pennington to come here, will you?'

He thought the other hesitated. It may have been his imagination. A moment later Pandora was with him.

It struck James, in view of the Minister's scheme, that it would be judicious as a shield to himself to adopt a purely official and indifferent note. It would be undesirable that Pandora should, for an instant, dream that he had taken any part in her proposed isolation in safer quarters.

'Sorry to bother you,' he said briskly, 'the fact is I have been at an important conference in the Minister's room all morning. Just got back. And this afternoon I'll be rushed off my feet. Can't hope to get back——'

He broke off, fluttering papers about.

'It's hopeless,' he murmured, 'quite hopeless.'

'There's to-morrow,' suggested Pandora helpfully.

'To-morrow,' he echoed with a distracted laugh. 'Why to-morrow I won't be here at all.'

'Not here——?'

'Out of the question. The Minister has just told me it is simply imperative that we go out of town——'

'Oh,' said Pandora, 'what fun. Are you coming too?'

II

The more he thought about it the more did James feel that the Minister, in his private capacity of uncle, should have mentioned that Pandora was going. The little incident had made him look foolish. These well-meant

outbursts of comedy, these little surprises, were, of course, innocent, and delightful, but they did not help the official pose. They carried an element of danger. It puzzled him to know just how his uncle was so intimate with his emotions. He tried to recall any occasion upon which he had even referred to Pandora except in the course of departmental work. It was inconceivable that Pandora would have taken things so far into her hands. Splendid thought, but hardly credible.

'And what,' said James, pacing rapidly towards Pall Mall, 'what about the future Mrs Humbleford? She must, of course, be elderly, but not so decrepit that she will take no active interest in her future home.'

In the smoking-room Michael Craig was speaking in cultured undertones to a Cambridge contemporary with tortoiseshell glasses. He rose at once and hurried towards James. He asked if he wanted to wash in the voice of a second mourner; he led the way to the dining-room with a step that was significant. And at odd moments over the thin University soup or the tepid University cutlets, James was uncomfortably conscious of the veiled solicitude, the tender compassion of Craig's eyes. They were eating cold prunes and cream rice, in itself a thoughtful affair, when Craig suddenly extracted a stone, laid it with extraordinary delicacy upon the side of his plate, and said:—

'I'm so afraid I'm going to hurt you. *Frightfully.*'

James struggled with a prune.

'It seems so strange,' mused Craig, 'that after all the years we've been so thick together that it should be I who butt in——'

'My dear fellow,' James longed to remark, 'you have butted in for nearly twenty years, so why stop? Push on, old boy. Nothing short of residence in Papua will ever come between us.' Aloud he said, 'What's it all about?' He adopted the air of Mr Aubrey Smith

confronted with some immense and shattering domestic revelation.

'It is so difficult to lead up to,' pleaded Craig, 'so hard to blurt out things that must wound. Perhaps I should not have asked you here. Would you rather we were alone? Shall we go to the library—there is never anybody there?'

'No,' said James with absolute firmness, 'not in the library. Here—over the prunes.' He was right. In the library, a vast room pointed out by members glowing with the quiet solemnity of port, there was a mediæval, cloistered atmosphere in which Craig would have talked and talked in a low, sonorous monologue. The hours would have passed. The two very old members, who sit at remote ends before remote fires, hating and loathing each other with the unquenched fire of the 'eighties, would have wakened and creaked away. Shadows would fall. Outside the roar of London would diminish. Even a commonplace whispered in such a room would chill the blood or fill with heavy tears agnostic eyes.

No—there was safety in prunes.

'It is,' Craig started off again, 'necessary to tell you what you already know. I came to the Ministry because Miss Pennington asked me. The Minister was very decent to me. In fact, he and Miss Pennington have dined at our house fairly often and the Guv'nor has helped us no end——'

'I know,' said James, referring to Sir Donald Craig and not at all to the other news.

'You see, I have never met any one like Miss Pennington.'

James lowered his head. He was not actually responsible for Pandora—only her future husband.

'She belongs to another age. I feel with her that she lived long ago in history——'

'Oh, yes,' said James politely. He was not there to argue.

Michael Craig hesitated. He was quite obviously on the brink of one of his biographical confidences.

'I have always been a very lonely man,' he said. 'I think you know that, James. I am an only son, and made few friends, and those only men. My interests, my temperament—all that—are rather out of date just now. The things I am fond of—solitude, poetry, old tales—these are all a little boring——'

'Nonsense,' said James, without conviction.

'They are,' persisted Craig, 'and because they are, I keep them to myself.' Warming to things never uttered, he slipped away from Pandora and dealt with the first symptoms of a genius that must be silent or perish. He spoke of early memories of places in the Highlands with names like a blasphemy. He said that his dream was to return to those places and never leave them, and, at those solemn words, James counted his prune stones in a dream.

'Fatal,' James murmured, and hurriedly cleared his throat. 'The loneliness,' he added. He knew at once he had made an undesirable remark. There was a sudden flame in the eyes of Craig which was unmistakable.

'That's it,' he said, starting forward with such intensity that the club steward moistened his pencil and made out his bill. 'I won't be alone. At least I hope not——'

'No,' said James absently.

'I was speaking about Miss Pennington. We both know what she is. But I wonder if even you realise the passionate love of that girl for the hills, and—and—the sound of the wind——'

James said nothing. He was a loyal man. Counting his prunes he understood for the first time the solace of a rosary.

'I don't suppose even you know her verses.

James said nothing. He saw himself a kind of shepherd's chief mourner if this kind of talk went on about Pandora.

'I read her some of mine and she brought hers. They are very remarkable. There was one night we went a long walk on Hampstead Heath under an autumn moon. I shall never forget it——'

James maintained a profound silence. Outwardly he was keeping well up to the Aubrey Smith level. Inwardly his mind was black with profanity. He could not have believed Pandora would behave so ridiculously. Letting herself in again. . . . Living like a modern novel after the Russian school, but quite a while behind.

'I asked her to marry me. She refused——'

'Bad luck,' broke out James heartily. 'I should have guessed. My dear fellow—oh, I say——'

'She said she would not marry——'

'Nonsense,' said James, and hesitated. Should he tell? Should he? The agitation of a lover is a touching but hackneyed emotion. He grew warm and tingled. He examined a cigarette scrupulously and lit it with a gesture.

'——until the present job is finished. But that's all right. I'm in no particular hurry. A long engagement—'

'Are you engaged or are you not?' asked James, in a clear, savage voice.

Michael Craig shrank from that jungle note. He was eighteenth century, not Stone Age. He felt perfectly certain the heads of several members had twitched an inch. He had especially desired a snug little corner in the library just in case . . .

'Not—not actually,' he replied.

'Excuse me asking so bluntly,' said James, 'because I don't want you to take long views about all this. Miss Pennington and I——'

'That's just it, old man. That's what I was coming

to. Of course, every one knows how much you're in love with her——'

'What d'you mean by every one?'

'Well, all the department.'

'They know?'

'Certainly.'

'Scandalmongers!' snorted James hotly, 'Malingering maligners.'

'So I feel rather badly. I don't want you to think purposely—you know. I'm not engaged. I don't even swear she'll have me. But I'm going to ask her the day after to-morrow, when—well, never mind. I thought I ought to tell you. It seemed only right considering everything. Then, if she accepts you first—good luck, old fellow. It won't make any difference to me—not, I mean, after a bit.' He spoke, with quiet restrained pathos, words which James knew would have strangled a packed theatre, sent a novel into fifty editions, and should, had he been worth while, have made him grasp Craig's hand, give him a hard meaning look, and pass at a run into the fog.

But James was lacking somewhere. He blushed for Craig. His dislike, his indignation, his shame, mounted to a sullen glow of resentment. What right had Craig to drag him into an organised scene like this, and send cold shivers down his spine?

'Don't be such an ass,' was what James said, and the harsh words wounded Craig. 'I mean to marry Pandora. I've meant to for months. I've told her so. She knows. She is simply playing about. Don't trust that girl. She will play the dickens if you do. But I was going to marry her soon, anyway. I'm seeing about a house to-day. In fact I'm going now. Thanks for lunch——'

The brutal words died away. Craig was pale but controlled. Nothing would ever make him noisy or normal. He also bore no grudge, no sense of deadly

enmity. He rose and accompanied James to the door.

'Good-bye,' he said. 'You are not angry?'

'Of course I'm not,' replied James furiously, and marched steadily away towards Hamptons. Ever since the prunes a suspicion had been growing at the back of his mind that Prussianism is one of the homely virtues.

He entered Hamptons. He left a few minutes later and passed into another house-agent's. His early particulars—the splendid vision of Uncle John—were amended. There seemed to be quite a number of other people after the kind of house with dreaming roofs, and open fire-places, and the confidential advantages of modern drainage. He abandoned inessentials as those Russian mothers did their little ones to the wolves. He clung to the broad horizon. A country house within reasonable distance of London. He discovered that the harassed city man must ease his fevered brain within a hundred miles of Cannon Street, Fridays to Mondays excepted. Farther and farther he crept away from London. Weaker and weaker grew his domineering and positive demands. There was even a moment when he almost took a charming, an unparalleled place in Somerset, from which a journey to London would have been noised about the country-side for months.

The young man who had a selection of these particularly remote residences haunted James. He was lulled by his soft persuasive voice, his superfine air, his discreet but elegant upholstery, his peculiar and memorable prose. In that pleasant room, panelled, noiseless, and heavily carpeted, there was the caressed, the emollient, the tempered atmosphere of Mr A. C. Benson's essays. It soothed James. He began to think of Craig more generously, as one muses kindly upon deceased persons who can never again behave as they most certainly would.

And all the time the young man went mildly, ungrudgingly on, saying things without turning a hair which Craig would have swiftly rushed into verse.

'Quite an exceptional little property, I can assure you, sir. Stands high, with noble views of the Trent Valley. A choice spot. Heavily timbered. It has just come on the market, and I advise you to consider it very carefully. Mr Glowworm, the owner, is a delightful gentleman, sir; I know you would like him. He is of the old school—a lover of old furniture, old books, old gardens—'

'Old wine,' said James pleasantly, and they both laughed sympathetic, democratic laughs.

'I quite believe it, sir. This is the front. Faces south. Wonderful drive through the woods. The rabbits, sir, and a little stream with trout leaping. I was *entranced*.'

James bent over the photograph. He had a vision after the Russian Ballet of Messrs Smithers' young man, in a bowler and a large bow tie, expressing immense gratification at the behaviour of a rabbit on left of stage.

'Mr Glowworm showed me over, sir. The hall is early sixteenth century, panelled in black oak. There is a perfect open fire-place with old fire-back dated 1558 and the well-known motto——'

He halted. Fearing his voice had failed, James raised sympathetic eyes. Upon the face of the young man was a look of tragic despair. He had forgotten the motto.

'And the number of rooms?' asked James, who could not bear to watch anything suffer.

'There are,' went on the young man, with a supreme effort, 'eighty bedrooms, twelve reception-rooms . . .'

It was evident their little time together was drawing to a close——

'It's the domestic problem,' murmured James, and in a few minutes passed out. As a solace to the young man he took an order to view a castle in the Highlands, a

smart little place but only approachable by boat. He had an intuition that sooner or later, upon a dark winter's night, after a day of ceaseless rain, some one would leave the battlements and Uncle John had the advantage in bulk.

The hours passed. His proud spirit crushed, his feet weary, his head resounding with superlatives, he was glad of anything and pocketed orders to view those desirable properties which are included in the permanent goodwill of every agent. But there were others. To some there will always be the eternal mystery, the undimmed expectation of the unseen.

CHAPTER XXI

I

In the study of history there are learned persons who deny, in their thin tenacious fashion, the possibility of dramatic downfalls, the sudden terrific collapse of solid empires. They say (rather rudely) that those who have the scientific habit of mind can trace. . . . They go right on, the Adam's apple in their attenuated necks, the faint moisture on their commanding noses, the awful gravity blazing behind their double-barrelled spectacles —these evidences of the soul's awakening warning the prudent to retire. To them in their subdued studies in Hampstead or Highgate or Turnham Green, the element of surprise is abhorrent to human experience. Such wise persons, strengthened by that wisdom after the event which, in all walks of life, proves such a solace, would have founded their theories of the turning-point in the official career of John Humbleford upon the little dinner and theatre which James was now hastening to attend. They would be wrong. The trouble went further back. Researches into the documents of official history will reveal, about 1998, the reckless letter sent by Mr Makepeace to Lady Boulter, a little note unseen by James and posted in error. Nothing too harsh could be said about Mr Makepeace in that connection. It put things with a brevity, a clarity, and a stark candour that would have shaken the Foreign Office. But even that need not have been a fatal blow. The adroit sacrifice of Mr Makepeace and Mr Fullerton, an official apology, and a speech at

the Albert Hall would have eased the tension. It was nothing so solid or obvious as these things. A Minister who can be proved to have turned his cat out-of-doors is in much greater peril than a Minister who merely expends ten million on a scheme which doesn't come off. And Mr Humbleford's little night out made a difference. . . . From that moment the word went round. While he was driving James and Pandora home it was passing over the telephone to those immensely old personages who are not even officially employed, but who are set about with titles, and orders, and country seats, and money, and talk with tired persistence in corners of huge Victorian drawing-rooms. And during that splendid, that unforgettable day which was coming, the day of Uncle John's vision of the future, they were straining their wasted chords down the telephone, they were driving hither and thither in closed conveyances, huge in their furs and mufflers, they were staggering into private rooms of great departments, they were lunching at the Marlborough, the Reform, the Conservative, they were saying they simply could not believe what they had been told. . . .

Uncle John was one of that happy army of adventurers who believe, and continue to believe, that they have discovered the best place for food in London. There is, in dining with such innocent pilgrims, a zest, a gusto, and an atmosphere of conspiracy which affords to the evening the colour of a romantic episode. The confidential instructions, the restrained excitement of Uncle John were in themselves a wonderful *aperitif*.

'Only been open a few weeks. . . . Nobody knows of the place. . . . Gorgeous cooking. . . . Thing's being kept frightfully dark. . . .' Any casual stranger perceiving Uncle John hissing these sentences into the rather saturnine ear of James would have gone out for

a late edition to see whether the police had got a clue.

Uncle John always believed, and sometimes induced his guests to believe, that the proprietor, or the head waiter, or the large gentleman in Czecho-Slovak uniform at the door, recognised him. He would call out from immense distances, 'That you, Angelo?' 'Cold, Savonorola.' And they never failed him. They clustered around, those smiling aliens, and took his hat, his coat, his stick, while he towered over them like a British cartoon of our share in the Great War, and regarded rather sharply persons at neighbouring tables whom he suspected had never come before. A moment later he went thundering up the rickety stairway, driving the gesticulating Signor Frutti before him—the great, the unsurpassable Fruttie, who had left (so Uncle John whispered) the Carlton simply to develop his genius in comparative obscurity. They entered the private room set apart for Uncle John. The table was laid for three.

'A cocktail, James?' said the Minister, and studied the menu with a considerable air. On the stairway the sound of steps. . . . 'This,' brooded James, 'may be a moment calling for great spiritual courage and resource. I have a conviction that the first glimpse of the future Mrs Humbleford will take me unawares. May, in fact, even stun me into a frightful, incredulous silence.'

He was right. For in the doorway stood Pandora.

The Minister uttered a shout of welcome. He gave James a little passing dig.

'Took you by surprise, my boy,' was all he said.

And then James jumped to it. Dear Uncle John. Big-hearted Uncle John. How simple everything is when one understands!

A moment later there sounded the unmistakable plunk of a champagne cork.

II

'I got stalls,' said Uncle John, in the taxi, 'stalls for *Pass Along, Please.*'

'Oh,' cried Pandora, 'how perfectly noble.'

'It's the best revue in town,' said James, with proper solemnity. 'I never hoped to see it this year.'

'I was determined to get seats,' came from Uncle John. 'I got them.'

'Isn't Lucette Lyons in it?'

'Rather.'

'French——' said Uncle John complacently.

'That song——' ventured James.

'I sing it,' whispered Pandora confidentially.

In a state of high excitement they were escorted to their seats. They were a little late, and the opening scene, a Turkish harem, was awaiting the appearance of that fine Lancashire comedian, Algie Wigan, as the Chief Eunuch. He kept the house in roars, and when he . . . But Uncle John's boyish laughter soared above the stalls and was swallowed up by the simple approbation of the gallery.

It was at once evident to James, who took his enjoyment in a more minor key, that Uncle John and Pandora were living every moment of it with a buoyancy, a wholesome appetite for fun, which has ever distinguished the childlike and the pure in heart. That Uncle John could not mute his appreciation was simply because he was Uncle John and had never quite grown up. He should have been appointed Uncle-in-General to all the orphan nephews in the town.

And the climax came with Lucette Lyons. She was one of those minute, perfectly proportioned Parisian ladies whose broken English is in itself worth a hundred a night. As the most popular and ravishing wife of the

Eastern potentate—that popular comedian Mr Mike Sherry—she had an historical explanation for her clothes. But James distinctly heard the muffled disapproval of two stout elderly matrons immediately behind him, whose splendid shoulders and massive pink arms gleamed amidst a snowdrift of nakedness in the stalls.

And then the conductor raised one white-gloved hand and that haunting, that unforgettable melody, began to steal over the theatre and die away, leaving Lucette standing with a chorus of Piccadilly young gentlemen in evening dress and gold knobbed sticks, all wearing that expression of supreme imbecility by which the music-hall stage signifies questionable anticipations. It was apparent that Lucette was undecided which gentleman to accept. She looked very minute and childlike on that enormous stage. She stirred in the audience, now craning downwards, upwards, sideways, that protective, comfortable sense which means so much to an artist. And her plaintive, touching broken English . . .

'To you—to you,
What do I mean to you?
I wonder if you'd *really* mind,
If I (pause) well—married you—would *you* be kind?
Would you—now—would you?
Oh, I don't know what to do.'

That was all. It's not great verse. There are even to-day better things about. They appear in the weeklies, or on special occasions in the *Times*. And they don't get there somehow. But there again, Lucette, could not be expected to sing all our poets into fame. Besides, there was that amazing, that unforgettable melody conducted by that expert in pauses and refrains, Otto Boch. He knew. But beyond everything, Lucette

with her ridiculous, plaintive little voice, and that devastating broken English. And then when that great audience was really warmed up, when hardly a person but had mastered at least most of the words, Lucette, ignored the Piccadilly gentlemen, who, very naturally, left the stage, and tripping forward to where a gangway crossed the orchestra, looked with anxious, but not hopeless, gaze around the stalls, where the white shirts of England were creaking with suppressed emulation. Again Mr Boch released that immortal refrain. And with one little hand pointing, now here, now there, Lucette sang:—

'To *you*—to *you*,
What do I mean to *you*?'

A small broker, with a vast wife in pearls and an aigrette, thought his own, his secret asides. But he looked down. He was coming again.

'I wonder if you'd *really* mind.'

An eminent physician being thus singled out was extraordinarily agitated and dropped his glasses, his programme, and suddenly discovered his great moment had no sooner come than it had passed.

'If I married *you* would *you* be kind?'

Lucette had advanced along her path of triumph. She was over Uncle John. She was looking down at him with that divine, that angel smile upon her lips.

'I'm sure you would,' she said confidingly, 'you *look* kind.'

'I would,' shouted Uncle John. No man in the prime of life, no man who was not a feeble, wife-driven, dyspeptic, or a Higher Division clerk could have acted otherwise. The house roared its appreciation. They knew on sight as all right-minded people always knew, that Uncle John was the right stuff.

But the two matrons behind went rigid. They whispered terribly together.

'If I married you would you be kind,
Would you—would you——'

'Oh,' said Lucette, just loud enough for Uncle John to share his big moment with the neighbouring stalls, 'I don't know what to do.'

She blew a little kiss to Uncle John, and might then have gone her primrose way. But instead, she shot a glance, gave a derisive tinkle of laughter, and pointed just behind James.

'You be careful,' she said.

They turned with lively, expectant faces—Pandora, James, and Uncle John. They would exchange understanding smiles and nods with the good people behind them. They met the terrible, the arctic, and annihilating gaze of Lady Pennington and Lady Boulter.

No words passed.

A few moments later, when an audience with the heart of a child was bellowing, 'To you—to you——' James was aware that the presences had gone. He drew no comfort from the fact.

But beside him Uncle John and Pandora were singing as birds sing when a mountain of snow is heaped up behind a wintry sun.

CHAPTER XXII

I

RICHARD PENNINGTON had come to a grave decision. Sitting there, upon that memorable evening when Pandora dined out with Uncle John, he was satisfied that he could not tolerate this kind of thing any longer. The flat had not been his own for weeks. He had found it impossible to convey to Pandora, without hurting her, or appearing unsociable and unsympathetic, that an unceasing stream of persons, however charming and distinguished, was not his idea of middle age. He was ready to admit he had been ridiculously weak. He should, of course, have refused with absolute firmness to permit his flat to be the dumping ground of old gentlemen, and young gentlemen, and that persistent company who move with impregnable composure in between. Pandora had pictured to him (it seemed years ago) very occasional, very sedate and select parties dining in undertones over roast mutton and official problems. It had been impossible, in view of the Minister's enthusiastic support of the scheme, to turn churlish. And the fact that he discovered Pandora was paying, and intended to pay, made things even more uncomfortable. Finally, the little parties which had met originally with such gravity split up, as such conferences will, into committees and sub-committees composed of Pandora as chairman and one other. They sat all over the house. There was the perpetual low murmur of voices. Young gentlemen waiting with the splendid hope of youth in the hall, or

the dining-room, or the bathroom, until old, or older, gentlemen had the decency to leave Pandora in the library. And the sight of Pandora reading Georgian poetry to the Minister, who was eating muffins in his favourite chair, disturbed Richard Pennington. But it was Pandora's young men who were sending him up in years. They were delightful, jolly young men, they never forgot to say how good it was of him to ask them. They voted him one of the best. But they simply could not help it! They made a noise. People knocked on the walls, and as his was a central flat, the Colonel's walking stick below was an echo of Mrs Montague's heel above. All around beat frenzied, embittered hands. Even during the whoops and bangs of Pandora's gramophone he seemed to hear that insistent menacing knocking. It haunted him. He left and approached his flat with the cringing demeanour of a guilty man. Those young men. They took Pandora to see Beckett and Carpentier, and when they returned they were in no wise cast down. They jazzed. They all jazzed. Alone or together they walked, they ran, they paused. And of those young men James Fullerton and John Humbleford fascinated Richard Pennington. Fullerton was tragic: the thing seemed actually painful. But the Minister, trotting with harassed solemnity up and down the room, was something for downcast eyes.

Richard Pennington decided that he must act. He would write his sister-in-law and strongly recommend that Pandora should return to the fine air of Sussex. There must be nothing dramatic or unpleasant about the adjustment—that was never the Pennington way. A little diplomacy, a touch of anxiety regarding Pandora's health, and once again it would be the general opinion amongst the observant and discreet that Richard Pennington had smoothed away, with his inexhaustible delicacy, a troublesome little complication. He had

waited. He had been patient. On all sides he would receive quiet sympathy from the Minister downwards to that spawn, that spasm—Pandora's young men. He would smile and lower his head. He would thank them and, God willing, once more sit on his own chair and poke his own fire. He asked nothing more. 'I will write,' said Richard Pennington. 'I will put things in such a way that Mary will be compelled to persuade me Pandora must return.'

The door opened.

'Mary!' cried Richard Pennington, with very natural astonishment.

His sister-in-law was in evening dress. She was a little out of breath. From the street below there came the sound of a taxi waiting.

'This *is* unexpected,' he went on. 'I did not know you intended running up. Have you seen Pandora?'

'Yes,' replied Lady Pennington, with a menace, a meaning, and an emphasis that was unmistakable.

Richard Pennington was instantly guarded. Urbane, solicitous—but guarded. He felt it a moment when his sister-in-law should empty her mind.

'I have been ill, Richard.'

'I am indeed sorry. But if I may say so, you look fairly well, Mary. I trust there is nothing to cause you worry.'

'There is, Richard. I am greatly upset. I hardly know where to begin. I'll seem ungrateful to you. More than that, I'll hurt you. I can't help it. Besides, I want your advice, and, in fact, your help. You always manage everything so well.'

Richard Pennington made a deprecating gesture. He felt both hot and cold. Decidedly he must continue to create a friendly, a helpful, an understanding, but a complete silence.

'After Pandora left Sussex I felt very uneasy.'

'Naturally,' Richard Pennington could not abstain from remarking, 'she is far from strong.'

'I heard very little, and the less I heard the more certain I was that something was wrong.'

'Wrong!' echoed her brother-in-law. 'Dear me.'

'I had an intuition. All those days I lay on my couch. I suppose a mother is guided.'

'She is very young,' remarked Richard Pennington, taking a safe and promising line.

'Now, I know you will not believe what I'm going to tell you, Richard. She is young, and I can guess how attached you are to her. I am perfectly sure—my instinct again—that she has made a greater difference in this flat than you could ever have believed. If she were to leave you—well, Richard——!'

'I admit it,' he said, with quiet courage, 'it would make a difference.'

'Could you bear it, Richard? After making her so happy here?'

'Perhaps if you told me more, Mary. I am a little taken by surprise.'

He rose and tramped bravely about the hearthrug, as finished actors handle these big moments.

'Of course you are. You are not angry? No, I see you're not. But Pandora is taking advantage——'

'Mary!'

'Please, Richard. Let me finish. It is all very well for you, sitting in peace in this secluded room, thinking your own thoughts, out of the world. Pandora, to you, may not be the real Pandora. I say no more. I cannot say less. But I have heard a good deal that has shocked me. I have seen something worse.'

Richard Pennington grew colder.

'A little amusement,' he said vaguely.

'Certainly. But what is amusement to you, Richard,

is not Pandora's idea of pleasure. At this moment where do you think that girl is?'

Richard Pennington stared with intensity at a burnt spot on the hearthrug. He had so nearly gone. Surely, as Lady Pennington had just remarked, our steps are guided.

'At a very vulgar and indecent revue called *Pass Along, Please,* and with her this precious John Humbleford and that Fullerton.'

'Still——' he began faintly

'My dear Richard, your nature is so charitable and you are so innocent, you simply do not understand. To begin with you have no idea what people are saying about Humbleford. Lady Boulter——'

'Oh dear,' sighed Richard Pennington.

'——has told me that an organised campaign will drive him out of office within a few months. This must concern you, dear Richard, even more than—than Pandora. I suppose you know that Mr Winterton has asked him to resign?'

'I heard something of it. But, my dear Mary, I must point out I am a civil servant, and that Mr Humbleford is——'

'I am sorry, Richard. I shouldn't have spoken like that especially as all I wanted to say was that when a Minister is seen the worse for drink——'

'Mary—Mary!'

'And an actress with nothing on——'

'Please.'

'Is making advances——'

'Come, come,' said Richard Pennington.

"That any mother with a sense of religion would remove her daughter *at once.*'

'And did you?' asked Richard Pennington, who had a sudden frightful inspiration that perhaps Pandora, the Minister and Fullerton were in the hall, hand-cuffed. Lady Pennington, who was regarding him with a

hard outraged stare, displayed considerable discomposure.

'I would have done,' she temporised, and then added with admirable adroitness, 'but would it have been fair on you, Richard?'

'I don't quite follow. But I must point out, Mary, that these libellous statements about the Minister have shocked me. I have a great respect and affection for Mr Humbleford.'

'I can only repeat, I am sorry, Richard. I can only tell you Lady Boulter is going straight home to the General. Straws show the way the current runs. A word in season, Richard. That's all. But Pandora is another matter. I wanted to avoid friction. I simply wish Pandora to start her life again. Be persuaded, Richard. I assure you it is for Pandora's good that she leaves London. I know you will be lonely, but there are others. I could come——'

Richard Pennington started violently, but no words came.

'Pandora is engaged to a Michael Craig. He is a clever, attractive young man, and I think he will mould her. Besides, they will live in the Highlands.'

'But you, Mary?'

'We must be brave,' said Lady Pennington, with admirable self-possession.

Richard Pennington perambulated the hearthrug. His belief in Providence was steadily growing. He saw his way—the old, old Pennington way, the Sydney Carton path with the guillotine bit blacked out.

'What can I do?' he asked.

'Everything,' said Lady Pennington. 'Pandora is only half engaged. She is usually in that interesting condition. She will refuse to leave you unless you put it in your dear, clever fashion. Don't let her play the martyr. She thinks the Ministry depends on her. Now,

leaving you outside, Richard, the sooner she is out of that ridiculous Ministry, with its insane ideas of making working people exercise themselves, the better. Besides —well, there is that Fullerton.'

'You wish me to advise Pandora to marry and go north?'

'Please, Richard. More—I beg you. I know what you are thinking——'

'I was thinking,' replied her brother-in-law, with perfect sincerity, 'that very soon I may be alone.'

His sister-in-law rose and pressed his hand. 'I knew it. I understand. But, Richard, we must also think of her. She is young.'

'I agree, Mary. We must think of her.'

'Have you always trampled on your own feelings, Richard?'

The Permanent Secretary was strongly moved. For a moment he could not speak.

'Not always, Mary,' he murmured at last. But it was quite obviously a beautiful falsehood.

II

Afar off Richard Pennington heard his bedroom door open. Then he knew he must be dreaming. It was still dark. But surely there was somebody in the room. There again, absurd, because they never brought his shaving water till he had had his morning tea, and the tinkle of the tray made a beautiful, an unmistakable sound. Burglars! Richard Pennington had no views on burglars. He listened intently. There *was* somebody in the room.

'Will you be more frightened if I flick up the light or simply wake you?' asked a voice in his ear.

It was, of course, Pandora.

'Are you ill?' asked Richard Pennington, jumping up.

'No,' said Pandora, and turned on the light. She was dressed in a fur coat, a small fur hat, a heavy woollen muffler, and held a pair of fur gloves in one hand.

'It'll be jolly cold,' she said, to break the news.

Richard Pennington blinked. It was not his hour. His hair looked whiter, his face more lined, his neck cadaverous. And he wore a good old woollen nightgown.

'You went to bed last night,' resumed Pandora, determined to go on breaking it very gently.

'I—I'm in bed still,' ventured Richard Pennington.

'I mean before I came home.'

'I was rather tired. I hope you enjoyed yourself.'

'It was a scream. Only sad, of course, considering everything.'

'Oh, yes.'

'How can you say "oh, yes," when presently you'll say "oh, no"? I thought last night when I was packing——'

'*Packing?*'

Pandora came and sat upon the bed.

'I am going to leave you,' she said simply. 'I shall probably never stay here again.'

At that moment the clock struck half-past six, and it occurred to Richard Pennington that even Irving could hardly have risen to such a moment at such an hour. No words came. Instead, he retired into the dark forest of the Pennington silence. Sitting there in his nightgown he might have been anything from the last night of Argyll to the return of the prodigal.

'Please speak, Uncle Richard. Say something.'

'What can I say? I am in the dark. You tell me you are leaving——'

'I am going to get married, Uncle Dick. To Michael Craig.'

'Married? Then you are engaged, Pandora?'

'Not altogether. But I'm feeling unsettled. I'm

rather miserable. When I came here I loved it all, and you, and it seemed as though I would be here for ever.'

A slight imperceptible shiver passed over the Permanent Secretary.

'And then the Ministry. That was such fun. But will it be fun much longer? I'm restless, Uncle Dick. I'm always waiting for something that doesn't turn up. . . . Michael is so wonderful,' she said as an afterthought.

'You mean you are going now? At once?'

She nodded mournfully.

'I shouldn't, I know. You'll think me unstable, isn't it, as water. I am all that. And you're so different, Uncle Dick. You go on. All the time. Living here alone. Pegging away. You've conquered life.' ('Have I?' mused Richard Pennington, but far away in that forest of his, 'have I not always given it the slip?')

'So I'm going to get married. At least I'm going to be really engaged and go north. And to-day the Minister, James Fullerton, and I are taking a day off. It may be our last day together. We're going in a motor seeing houses.'

'Houses?'

'Yes, like that. Houses. Anybody's houses. With a slip of paper you hand to the servant, who tears off a bit, and shows you rooms with people at tea talking stage talk till the door closes, and you walk on tiptoe for fear you waken the stomachy gentlemen on the billiard-room couch. All day you can think of us rushing through the lanes of Sussex and speeding up long silent avenues of trees. Won't you come, Uncle Dick? It will be such splendid fun. And we dine at night. Then I leave by the express for Michael's home. The Minister and James will see me off. Would you rather say good-bye at six on a frosty morning, Uncle Dick, or eleven on a King's Cross platform?'

Richard Pennington did not answer. He was overtaken by the deplorable reflection that Pandora was going, and that there is no such thing as freedom of will. Those little evenings. He knew that in his heart he had not cared about them. Those little dinners. Things would be quiet now. A sunset mild and a trifle pensive would linger awhile upon the house. Something was leaving him. In his heart under that memorable night-gown he knew that it was youth.

'Must I say good-bye, Pandora?'

'I expect so.'

'You are not quite certain. Supposing——?'

'Yes, Uncle Dick?'

'Supposing you decided not to marry. Would—would you not return? Give up the Ministry. Just live here. Or would that be very dull?'

'Have I ever been dull, Uncle Dick?'

'No,' he admitted with a wry smile. 'It was I, Pandora.'

'Rubbish. You only want a little schooling, Uncle Dick.'

'No,' he said, 'I am too old. But if you don't marry?'

'Then I'll set out——'

'But where?'

'Anywhere. Life cannot be sought. It just turns up.'

'And your mother? She has been ill.'

'I know. Didn't I tell you? She's been wasting for a worry. If I don't get married I'll give her the biggest worry she's ever dreamed of——'

Outside there sounded a motor horn repeated frequently three times.

'They're there,' said Pandora. 'Good-bye, Uncle Dick. Don't ever fall back on the Richard.'

'Good-bye, Pandora.'

She was gone. He lay motionless for a moment, then stealing rather stiffly out of bed he drew back a corner of

the curtain. In the street below, with headlights blazing, was a huge car indistinguishable in detail. As he watched, it began to glide away, changed gears, and went throbbing along the Embankment. He knew that it would return in a few hours, that he would assuredly see Pandora very soon. But shivering a little at the frosted window, he had a curious and mournful intuition that with the car was passing away something which would never come back. 'This,' he said, 'is the beginning of old age.'

CHAPTER XXIII

I

It was upon that memorable morning that every householder in the British Isles received, or should have received, his Form XY 502 Z. In all the dailies there were leading articles, and special articles, and helpful, instructive paragraphs. There was a cartoon of John Humbleford, an immense heroic figure in a Roman toga, leading an anæmic C3 labourer on to a playing-ground with a large sun marked 'Health' to guide less gifted readers. There was a cartoon of the British plumber—that immortal—scratching his head and applying for 'beer.' There were verses of the strong, surging kind, and verses that made the Ministry pensive. There were also those forerunners of the turning tide—a strident peacock note by a bishop pointing out the baleful influence of state recognition of athletics upon church attendance, and a short concise mutter from an eminent employer upon German competition. There was also the usual letter from 'A Harley Street Physician,' drawing attention to the deterioration of tissues evidenced by statistics in cases of Chinese labour abroad.

But the main problem was the forms themselves. The entire British nation took up their pens, and then laid them down. Unlike the gentlemen in *Who's Who*, no small minority of the English-speaking world, they hesitated. They did not simply write with a flourish, 'shooting, fishing, hunting,' and wet a stamp. They were faced by the intrepid dangers of pledging themselves

to the Government. A distinguished professor suffering from chronic astigmatism may snatch a brief moment of adventure by writing 'recreation—elephant shooting.' But it goes no further. He is not officially directed to depart for Central Africa and enter into his rest.

But here, whatever a man might say, might, if the present Government had anything to do with it, trap him into a position of great physical danger and embarrassment. It was so obvious that the State was getting at the working man somewhere. Opinion was divided upon the menace underlying this apparent Utopia. To the employers it was an open threat of industrial revolution, a sapping of the impulse to work. To the Church it was anti-Christ. To the medical profession it was a barefaced scheme to wreck an ancient calling. To the landowner it was a plot to grab his property under pretext of providing a new heaven for the agricultural labourer. To the Irish it was a diabolical machine to turn out in still larger samples the oppressors of a people who suffered in silence.

There were, however, two large classes who faced the question with normal and sensible distrust. They allowed the humour of the notion. That picture of the navvy deer-stalking in Inverness-shire, for instance, with the words, 'What abarht overtime, guv'nor,' underneath. That went to the heart of the nation. It made the utter absurdity of the whole idea very palpable. The middle classes decided that they would continue to recreate themselves. But the labouring classes were swayed by the growing opposition of the employers. They nourished a commendable conviction that when the kindly manager said, 'For your own sake—no,' the prudent worker should take pause. But there, again, what should they apply for? Lists of recreations were provided. There was a rumour of a meeting under the succulent sentiments of the Lord Mayor. No money

was asked. No vote was mentioned. No reference to public houses was made. Really it was most puzzling for an honest British toiler. There, again, if he said 'football' what would it entail? Would he be fined for being late, or tearing his shorts, or failing to score? Would a Government van like Black Maria pick him up, to the ridicule of Bill Jopp next door, who had stuck down 'rabbits,' and could therefore smoke his pipe at home?

In the meantime the Government was pledged to recreate the British people. Local organisations were already quarrelling amongst themselves and with each other. Since the War Memorials there had not been so much unchristian feeling in the country. People attending conferences are accustomed to 'put forward a suggestion in no spirit of contention or finality,' and then fight it with sustained ferocity; but when each member spoke with glowing warmth upon his particular recreation, and when some members were opposed to any form of recreation whatever, and other members asked for an official definition of the word 'recreation,' and were not prepared to be satisfied until they got it, the mere absence of the official returns passed unnoticed. There are to-day, when the word recreation has fallen into such disrepute, committees still sitting in isolated districts, committees overlooked or forgotten, or simply unknown, the murmur of whose voices may still be heard droning perpetually from the open windows of local public halls.

II

As the car whirled onward through the endless streets of a suburban London heedless how it preserved its muscles and husbanded the passing hours against eternity, as it hummed along a road leading to Kent, that miserable land of hops, the Minister spoke of it all

with that distracted solemnity which he gave to national affairs.

'They are not filling them up,' he said, 'why not? What is your name?' this to the chauffeur, who swerved, coming of a family who kept themselves to themselves.

'Hogbin, sir.'

'Have you had a form? About recreation?'

'I had a form, sir.'

'Have you filled it up?'

'No, sir?'

'Why not?'

'I have no recreation, sir. I have *habits*, not recreations.'

The Minister started violently.

'What do you mean by habits? What do you do in your spare time?'

'I sleep, sir. I find it difficult to keep awake if I sit down. That's why I am giving up the car.'

The remark interested them all.

'Sleep? Do many people sleep—I mean, of course, at odd hours?'

'I think I may say, sir, without exaggeration, that all our street sleeps when not at work.'

There fell a grave, a deepening silence. The car whirled through Kent, that over-estimated suburb, and approached the northern boundaries of Sussex. Through Sevenoaks, through Tonbridge, most terrible township, towards Tunbridge Wells, that last refuge of the bombazin, and still the Minister was plunged in mournful reflection.

'If the forms are not filled up,' he said at last, 'there will be a question in the House. The forms *must* be filled up. I am strongly in favour of conscription. The nation must be taught its duty to posterity.'

James was overtaken by a vision of the future. 'Then

you'll have passive resisters. There'll be the man who tears off his fishing waders and dies of pneumonia. All England would line the streets as his cortège passed into the Abbey.'

'We'll face that problem when it comes. Already there is a movement for providing recreation on a voluntary basis supported by voluntary funds. It is run by funds provided by persons who desire to smash the scheme. You see? On the surface it is a jolly little idea of Lord Blank to play the game by his estate. He has a pleasant little dream of feudalism come home to roost. And he hates the notion of the State posting a football down to the village green. If any one gives a football he's damned well going to—not so good a ball, perhaps, but then he knows quite as well as we do it won't have to last so long.'

'Then let him,' said Pandora.

'Kill the scheme. They don't want his benevolent perambulation round the touchline on a Saturday afternoon. The Washington Irving stunt stopped quite a while ago. And if we can't buy the land for recreation, we'll take it. Yes, by Jingo!'

'Revolution,' murmured James, 'that's what they're all saying already.'

'It's not revolution,' grumbled the Minister, sulking, 'it's common sense. It's—it's progress.'

'On the one hand,' remarked James, wakening Hogbin with rare delicacy. 'On the one hand, there is monied interest against it, the employer, the landowner, the Church, the Conservative, the Press, you know. The usual lot. On the other hand there is the loud and incredulous laughter of the labourer. Between the two are the party who will resist it on that old intrepid basis of resisting everything, the party who like the idea if they can run it themselves, and order people about, and the party who applaud the bally scheme for reasons so

imbecile that they are no better than the wounds of a friend.'

'This,' said Pandora softly, 'is Sussex. Couldn't you stop now? After all——'

'I adhere to my original point,' said the Minister, taking no notice, 'the idea is all right. It must come. It will come. But it is falling away. It is showing up jolly crude and patchy. It is an instance of the enormous forces in ceaseless and eternal opposition to change or progress. Some of the romance, the colour, has passed already. It is always the way. Action and reaction. I remember all through my life I have in smaller, more personal ways, experienced the first fine rush of emotion, the early dawn, when it has seemed, on every ground of argument and human probability, that here at last was a good thing. Whereas, looking back in the glaring light of knowledge and disillusion, one is amazed at one's credulity and blazing hope. That is if one pauses. But listen to me, you two. . . . Let Hogbin sleep—this is a straight road. I have never sat around the wreckage. I have never nailed bits over my mantelpiece and talked about it all for the next thirty years. I have never looked back.' He glanced from one to the other with the large earnestness of a child. They nodded understandingly. Uncle John had not the look of a man who dropped weight over lost causes.

'But this is different,' he said, with an assurance James considered creditable but visionary, 'this *is* the real thing. One step at a time. First a house—then a frontal attack. But later—later. We are in Sussex now.'

'And after all that,' mused James, 'Grandmamma and the survival of the fittest,' and repeated, liking the sound of it, 'We are in Sussex now.'

'This, sir,' said Hogbin, drawing up, 'must be the 'ouse.'

Outside, a very ancient man with a Newgate fringe

was sitting on a bank. He stared at them with the persistent indifference of the very aged. The Minister, bending over him, and through hollowed hands, howled the name of the house. The ancient man puffed steadily at his one-inch clay. He was not deaf, it appeared later, but he knew. There was nothing on general principles of existence he did not know, and could therefore disregard as superfluous. He had been shouted at before. He was, in fact, shouted at daily. He submitted. The shouting brought his wife, who was, as it happened, rather hard of hearing, to the window. It saved him from stepping painfully within. So does God arrange. . . .

The woman, very bent, wrinkled, lifeless, came through the doorway, down the path, and shoved a large rusty key into the enormous lock. The gates creaked back, and without a word she started with surprising rapidity up the deserted avenue, the leaves whispering their indignation (or perhaps mere empty gossip) about her feet. The avenue was dark between the great statuesque trees on either side. In summer time, when the leaves were full, James thought how cool and silent, how inexpressibly peaceful it must be, with its fragrance, its stillness, its sense of old dim years. And as they tramped on, leaving in the outer world Hogbin, who was already asleep, and that ancient man who knew all that mattered, he stared with a sense of unreality at the small woman limping, bent as witches must have been, at the aggressively modern figure of the Minister, at Pandora, who might have lived in any age, and was suddenly aware of the quiet, intense, observance of the trees.

The avenue moved upwards and then, when the Minister was out of breath, went for a whim of its own downwards to where a minute rill of water crossed the roadway and flickered with the sustained note of a gnat

down the other bank. It seemed to James that they would walk on like that until they dropped, that always the small woman would limp just out of call, that the wood had no real existence, and that Rackham would probably illustrate them better than most. It seemed to him also that whereas hundreds of persons with 'permissions to view' had trudged up there and trudged all the way back, hundreds were even now alive and unknowing of their pilgrimage. It was without question that the house, as yet unseen, had not suited any one for about a century, and would therefore probably continue to prove out of the question. It was also obvious, removing the general atmosphere of melancholy altogether, that the old woman who had not even spoken, was carrying out an old, an appointed task, and it occurred to James that she must be one of that priesthood who are set apart to minister to the insatiable curiosity and aimless perambulations of men, that historic company whose early progenitors were followed by gaping spectators aboard the Ark.

Elated with the enormous possibilities of the notion, and charmed with its wealth of colour and romance, its ageless story, he hurried on.

The Minister sniffed in the good smell of winter. He expanded.

'Christmas,' he said, 'think of it. Christmas here. Lots of food, fires, immense fun. Like it used to be long ago. We'll waken up the place, my boy. We'll set the ghosts on the move. Recreation, that's it—recreation. Why, if I could bring back Father Christmas into every house this year I'd rank with the great johnnies of history. . . .' Pandora and James watched him in that veiled silence of the young. 'I'll have a horse, and a troop of barking dogs, and a home farm, and all that sort of thing. Jerseys in the meadow and a pony under the old apple-tree.'

'Hasn't one of our poets touched on that?' asked Pandora innocently.

'Late at night—Christmas Eve—we'll all drive up this avenue with the rabbits scurrying ahead of the lamps, and we'll walk arm in arm into the panelled hall. I can see it.'

The voice of the Minister ebbed away. They could all see it. It stood very high and wasn't built to be missed.

The old woman, unappalled, disinterested, passed on. She went up the broken steps, she pushed a key into the quaking door. But they halted on the threshold. Pandora and the Minister turned with severity upon James.

'This can't be the one,' they said with finality.

'This isn't a house,' remarked the Minister sternly, 'it's a picture of the War.'

The wind blew softly through the desolation that had once been an eighteenth century pleasance, it displaced with a kind of gentle abstraction dead leaves upon the terrace wall where peacocks had pirouetted long years ago. In the open doorway the old woman waited.

'It may be better inside,' said James, with an effort.

The old woman spoke for the first time. 'This is the hall,' she said, and added an illuminating remark, 'Do you want to see more?'

Large slabs of ceiling had collapsed on winter nights and crashed upon the broken floor. There was a remarkable smell.

'James,' said the Minister, staring with noticeable intensity the other way, 'just take a look for form's sake at the upstairs rooms. We'll wait in the room here.'

'This was the dining-room,' said the old woman, and, leaving them there, James followed her up the dark stairs.

He returned ten minutes later with the certain knowledge that there was no roof, no drains, no water, only the spirit of high adventure.

'I'm afraid,' he began, coming suddenly into the room. He broke off. He and the old woman were as shadows of the past surveying the eccentric conduct of the present.

For, in a corner near a broken window, Uncle John was upon the point of kissing Pandora.

'Look here,' said James indignantly. Probably in that very room centuries ago a duel had been fought and lost. The house was sympathetic to that kind of thing.

Uncle John showed no surprise, no shame. People don't just now. But he had the decency to leave Pandora. He came heavily across that huge room and, ignoring the old woman, who remained throughout a passive and quite indifferent spectator, said in a low, sepulchral tone to James:—

'She refused me.'

'You mean you actually asked Pandora to—to marry you?'

'Naturally. Are you surprised?'

'I find it difficult to say how I feel. At your age. And behind my back.'

'I don't follow. You can't mean that *you*——'

'Certainly.'

'My poor boy. But she doesn't love you. She likes you, James. We all like you. But—well, you're so settled. She said so. I don't want to hurt you, James. I never suspected. Honour bright. You seemed the last man.'

The old woman pressed the key against her nose; then she sneezed. In the far distance Pandora was like a ghost of a forlorn maiden with her figure dimly silhouetted against the broken window.

'I thought you realised,' whispered James fiercely, 'I imagined you jumped to the idea. That's why we want the house—even this house. Don't you see, Uncle John?'

'But I want Pandora. And I mean to marry her.'

'So do I.'

They glared at each other in the deepening gloom. Outside, along the shattered terrace, the wind rising a little towards sunset drove a scurry of leaves past the window where Pandora stood.

'You might play the game,' muttered James feelingly. 'After all, you've had your turn.'

Uncle John started and nodded.

'I didn't mean that,' he replied, 'go ahead. I only meant afterwards, not now.'

'There may be no afterwards for you.'

Uncle John said nothing at all to that.

James left him standing beside the old woman and went quietly up that long, low-ceilinged place.

'Pandora,' he said, 'you know why we've come here. It was to settle down.'

He hastened on, aware that the very idea of staying a single night in such a place would chill the most ardent proposal. 'Not here specially. Anywhere. So long as you and I are together.'

'What's to happen to——' she nodded over the darkness where Uncle John was standing beside the old woman.

'Anything you like. Once we're married. That's all that matters.'

'This marriage business,' said Pandora, with a note of petulance. 'It all comes back to that.'

'My dear, why should you be so apprehensive?'

'Because—oh, I don't know.'

'If you love a person——'

'I love people for different reasons, at different times. I don't love them all the time. And if I must live night and day with any one, then I must surrender what perhaps I cling to most for a kind of second best. Or must I?'

'This second best?' asked James.

'Besides,' said Pandora, as an afterthought, 'I'm engaged.'

In the room there fell a deeper, a reminiscent silence.

'I'm going to marry Michael Craig. At least, I'm leaving for Scotland to-night. James,' she went on softly, 'am I to blame? Have I ever made you think I loved you?'

'No,' he replied thoughtfully. 'No, I couldn't say that. But you do a little, don't you?'

Pandora looked up. Then she looked down. In full view of Uncle John he kissed her. It may seem an outrageous thing that, in a deserted house, she should be kissed and asked in marriage twice within half an hour; but the duty of the conscientious historian is clear. To the ancient woman, who could recall, if invited, romantic incidents of the past, the episode was insignificant.

In a thoughtful silence they departed out of the room, across the hall, and down the steps. Once again the key grated in the lock. They passed down the drive, and went quietly along the avenue. Ahead of them the old woman, a dim crouching shadow, limped with agility, never looking back. At the lodge gate she accepted half a crown without comment and disappeared within, where the ancient man had gone at his accustomed hour, and was now sitting before a smouldering wood fire. On the road, Hogbin was standing.

While for them time had tarried an instant the world had moved on.

III

'Well, good-bye,' said Pandora once again.

The Edinburgh express began to move steadily, inexorably away. It left James and Uncle John waving and again waving. They tramped down the deserted

platform and out on the street. And again Uncle John remarked, 'She won't marry him,' as though by process of reiteration he would clinch the matter once and for all.

'It puts one out,' said James, with vague deference to Uncle John, 'it means that this country house——'

'Is off, my boy, right off. I knew instinctively as we motored down. And I would have tired of it. It reminds me of all those other hundred jaunts one takes in life which achieve nothing at such an expenditure of time. Smoke, James—just smoke. You spent a day searching for a house no man in his senses would dream of taking as a gift from the nation, for what? In order that Pandora might refuse you.'

'*You*,' put in James firmly. 'After all she did not refuse me—*technically*.'

'My dear boy, what do you expect the dear child to do? She wants to make it as easy as she can.'

'In your case,' said James, 'a little consideration is to be expected. After all, you are my uncle.'

'You haven't told her? Surely, James.'

'I have not. All I intended to convey was that—well, to be perfectly frank, you are——'

'Yes,' assisted Uncle John, knowing a direct and brutal reference to the fifties was due, and prepared to deal with the thirties very thoroughly after his own ebullient fashion.

'The Minister,' concluded James nimbly.

They accelerated their pace. As they passed Euston and turned sharply towards Gordon Square, the Minister rallied.

'In any case,' he observed, 'we must leave London ourselves—you, Pennington, and I.'

'Oh!'

'We must wake up the country. Scotland. Let's try Scotland. Things look bad. Boulter's at it again. He's

speaking in Edinburgh next month, and I'm going to ask him to join in a public discussion. We'll go north, James. And we'll keep together. . . . It won't be for long.'

'I don't quite follow.'

'Pandora won't marry that boy.'

'All right, we agreed on that before. But that affects me rather——'

'You? Oh, yes, of course.'

'It affects us both,' said James, who felt he could afford it.

As they passed with steady tread across Bedford Square the Minister became, with appalling suddenness, just Uncle John.

'I say, James,' he remarked, 'I suppose you're not interested in motors.'

'Well, no.'

'I've heard of a new invention. Amazing thing. Only a few in the know. The shares——'

'I'm broke,' said James, with finality.

At Trafalgar Square the Minister hailed a taxi, and sprang in. James prepared to turn towards the Tube. But something was evidently wrong. From within the sinister body of the cab there was a sound of struggling, a muttering, exclamations.

'James, my boy.'

'Hallo!'

'I put on my other trousers.

'Oh, yes.'

'And left my money—ha, ha—left it behind. Not a penny,' laughed Uncle John.

James drew out his purse and covered a pound note too late.

'That'll be enough,' he cried, with extended fingers, 'that'll see me home.'

For a moment he regarded James with boyish affection

and just as though he were leaving for school and pocketing a tip from his rich, stern, but kindly guardian. Then with that amazing passage from the naïve to the majestic, so characteristic of Uncle John, and his hat tilted sideways by the top of the cab, he said with prophetic solemnity, 'Whatever happens, James, don't lose heart. Rely on me. I know, in fact, I have always known, there are tremendous things ahead of us.'

And so, with waves of the hand and indistinct shouts of confidence and farewell, Uncle John went bumping down Whitehall.

'Poor old devil,' thought James generously, 'after all he's had a knock-out to-day.'

'I'm downright sorry for that boy,' mused Uncle John, as he charged past the War Office. 'A stranger simply wouldn't believe he had taken the count to-day.'

CHAPTER XXIV

I

'THIS,' said James, staring up at the black, rain-driven building, 'must be the "Mactavish Hall." '

Outside the door pressed and shoved a black, dripping multitude of people. Inside, a vast audience, who, in that terrible climate, are prepared to sit anywhere, night and night, so long as it can be in bulk, argued in grim solemnity together.

In the ante-room the Reverend Gregor Duff, the popular preacher and author, was ready to shout a welcome. Wherever there is a large enough meeting about any question of enormous, momentary importance there will be Gregor Duff, one of those small, vital men with the vocal range of a cornet, and that homely vulgarity inseparable from world-wide approval.

'Terrible nicht,' he cried. 'Glad to meet ye. There's a rare welcome waitin' juist roond the sneck o' yon platform door. Ever addressed a Scots gathering, eh?'

'No,' said the Minister, staring hard at Mr Duff with the inborn suspicion and antipathy of one demagogue for another.

'A've addressed—apart frae preaching the Worrd—I'm a minister first an' last, ye mind——' He paused, and they all rallied and schooled their sense of credulity. 'A've addressed—I'm tellin' them the nicht—A've addressed nearly——' Again that calculated pause and the eyes of Mr Duff pinning their undivided attention, '——nearly fifty thousand. Canada, America, New

Zealand, Australia, and Scotland. And the best of all is juist auld Scotland.'

('Damn the fellow,' said James, 'he's at it already.')

Mr Duff eyed them with emotion.

'I'm not ashamed to admit,' he said 'that I canna say the word Scotland withoot a tickling—*here*.'

The Minister nodded moodily.

'There'll be the lads frae the War oot there,' remarked Mr Duff, with a gesture towards the seething hall, 'don't forget that. They know me. I was oot. A'm fifty but I was there. I preached to how many do ye imagine—?'

('Oh, blast the fellow,' said James. 'He's off again.')

'To four hundred thousand. They'll no forget. Nor will I. In the market square in Rouen one nicht, within soond o' the guns. . . . Maybe ye've read my little buik. What a sale it's had. Phenomenal success. I wrote it by candlelight. Over there. Within soond. . . . They say the title's catchy——'

'What,' asked the Minister, with deep resentment, 'is the title?'

'*With God in a Dug-out*. Simple. Direct. We must say what we think to-day.'

'I agree,' said the Minister. 'In my speech on Recreation to-night——'

He kept steadily on. The eyes of Mr Duff grew slowly vacant, his mobile face relapsed. He was turning over in his mind one or two fresh pits of pathos or mirth into which he would shortly precipitate his fellow-countrymen. He had heard vaguely that there was talk about Recreation. He did not know. He would slip away after he had introduced the Minister. . . . There was a Social Evening at his Church Hall. . . . There was no one quite like Mr Duff at Social Evenings in a Free Church Hall. People nudged one another with positive gusto as he pushed his way on to the platform, the ladies pouring out smiled about the urn, the other ministers

veiled their hatred and rancour, and all over a room, steeped in the fragrance of tea and buns and communicants, arose the ejaculation: 'There he is—there's Gregor Duff. Man, it's fair redeeclous but I juist laugh ootricht whenever I catch a glimpse o' yon wee Duffie.' Any man known to his fellow-citizens as 'Duffie' is sure of a fine turn-out at his funeral. However . . .

II

On the platform were the supporters of the Government upon one side and the supporters of General Sir Jonah Boulter on the other. They bore a startling resemblance to each other. It would have been almost impossible for an intelligent person to have said, 'Here, to the right, are the leaders of Progress and Civilisation, with that great man Humbleford dreaming his dreams of empire, and over there, obvious in their sheepish and criminal nonchalance, the enemies of the human race, the paid assassins of Liberty.'

There was, of course, the Minister. When he appeared the audience cheered sullenly. They passed him on sight as a man of substance. Then came Sir Jonah. It was extraordinarily like Olympia on a heavy-weight night. James had never seen the General before. And as he watched the generous and enthusiastic reception with which every gathering receives Boulter, he pondered upon the profound mysteries of the human soul. Boulter was on the big side, with immense bristling white moustaches, a cut down his right cheek, a pronounced red nose, and an eye of blazing glass. He was everything that was assumed, or expected, or unbelievable in generals. He was the general of all time, the historic general, the Man of the War. He sat there glaring at the massed, packed hall, and when he drank from a tumbler

of water people craned and whispered and some said he had been a tectotaller ever since his mother died, and others said he belonged to the good hard-drinking type, but every one was impressed and pleased to see Boulter drink at all. He, too, beside him had his introductory speaker, but being, like the cream of the English Higher Command, an earnest and ruthless Anglican, he had persisted, against intense opposition, in inviting the Bishop of Pittendreich, who, as a mere Episcopalian and an Oxford man, naturally carried no weight whatever.

The Reverend Gregor Duff, after a playful little scene on the platform by which the audience was given the impression that he would rather prefer to flee than talk to so many strangers, said that he knew very well, and he agreed with them, that a very few words indeed would suffice so far as he was concerned. He remarked that to intervene between Mr Humbleford and two thousand Scots might please some people but he was a married man (immense shouts of laughter). His wife was looking uneasy up there already (Mrs Duff in a box was regarded closely by four thousand eyes) . . . With these opening statements, Mr Duff, with the Ministry of Recreation as a vision of the future, and the very near future, he hastily added, drew the attention of the audience to the achievements of Scotland in the past. He said the Scots were proud of their part in history (applause) and they had a right to be proud of their part in history (applause reinforced). He ventured to add that he had some reason to be familiar with that most tender if shy of things—the Scottish heart (sympathetic scrapings of feet). Not only in Scotland. But abroad. All over the world. And in what part of the world would they not find a Scot of some sort? (Appreciative noises.) He stated that he had addressed audiences . . . 'I cannot say the word Scotland without a tickling—*here*' . . . (profound atmosphere of tension and an umbrella dropped with a sound

like a bomb). 'I'm fifty . . . God in a Dug-out' . . . (swings tremendously into peroration) . . . 'I want to tell you what a poor woman said to me in a tram-car as I came along. She was not dressed as you or I, she had not what are called the social amenities' (this scornfully). 'But she said to me, and I saw the tears rolling down her shawl.' (Anecdote in dialogue) . . . (Enormous, sustained, and repeated applause). . . .

The Minister faced an exhausted house. He stood regarding them with that memorable air of thoughtful gravity which he had directed upon the Advisory Committee some weeks before. Suddenly, throughout that place there penetrated his clear, melodious, disturbing voice. And in an instant they forgot that imaginary old woman in the imaginary tram-car. They thought rather less of Gregor Duff. After all he was well enough, but there was nothing new about 'Duffie.' So long as you went early, you could always hear him at the High Wee Tron. . . .

The things the Minister was saying deliberately, appealingly, even passionately, were acknowledged to be of amazing insight and profound knowledge in a southerner. Give the Scot his due, he is not intolerant of all statements—only statements with which he is not in absolute agreement. There are such statements. John Humbleford had collected quite a number in the train. He uttered them with fortitude, with the fine air of a Daniel not alarmed to cast strong meat to the lions. He stood there alone, indomitable, prepared to be shouted down, but to do his duty as a simple, honest patriot.

He gave it as his opinion, and they might deny it as they pleased, that Scotland occupied a place in the history of learning and solid worth unrivalled amongst all the nations of the present century, or he even ventured to add, the æons of history. (Applause.) He stated that

he had a conviction, which could *not* be shaken, that the British Empire owed more to the Scot than it could ever repay. (Applause.) He remembered that in facing that vast, that cultured, that hard-headed audience, that he dared not say a word which was not sincere or strictly in accordance with facts. The annals of history supported him, the voice of romance could not be denied, the songs of the poets could not be hushed. (Great applause.) He recalled the great names, and in recalling them he knew he touched chords of sacred memory, of innocent childhood, of untarnished glories that were treasured, and would be treasured, while the moving words of 'Auld Lang Syne' maintained their indestructible appeal (prolonged applause) . . . Passing on, the Minister asked whether any person was so blind, so obsessed, so fatuous as to imagine for a moment that this was a race to bow the neck to the edicts of any Government unless those edicts, those provisions, were in accordance with progress and civilisation. (Great excitement, during which a gentleman near the roof started the bagpipes and was hurried away for refreshment . . .)

When the Minister sat down it was evident that, if the audience was not actually responsible for the Ministry of Recreation, it had made it inevitable.

In the silence, General Sir Jonah Boulter again drank a little water, and rose ominously to his feet. He stated that he felt very deeply his inadequacy in following the last speaker. He was not an orator, his life had been one of deeds not words, and he could not therefore hope to win them with phrases, though he had his own opinion whether they had been won by phrases. (Air of grim suspicion.) He was not a politician, because his experience of politicians could not be mentioned in the presence of ladies (laughter, and close scrutiny of Mrs Duff). In his view the less one believed in official statements the better, unless and until they were supported by facts.

I am an old soldier,' reverberated the General, 'and I may be a stupid, blundering old idiot. But I have no axe to grind. I might be sitting quietly at home like any other man of my age. Perhaps I ought to be.' (Hot cries of 'No.') 'Thank you. Take it from me, I'll carry on so long as I have a voice.' (Applause.) 'Or a leg to stand on.' (Passionate applause.)

The General, menacing them with one arm, begged to be informed whether they admitted his right to pay a tribute to the Scottish soldier. (Applause.) He had had the honour of commanding them. He knew what they could do; and they knew what he could do. There were people, possibly clever people (derisive and sympathetic laughter), the sort who sit in Government offices at the expense of the ratepayer (groans) who said he was a bad general, that he was a fool, and that he had never won a battle. (Shouts of 'Shame' and uproar.) They were right. (Commotion and a few verses of 'He's a Jolly Good Fellow.') He was not there to speak down. He must say what he believed. And he was as big a blunderer as any of them. (A voice, 'Good old Boult,' and resounding applause.) He only wanted to say that he relied not on himself but on the Men (very great enthusiasm). So long as any were left he had never given up. He would tell them about one of the proudest moments in his life. He recalled that on one occasion in South Africa he had returned with three men out of a battalion. Three men. What did they do? They *thanked* him. (Deafening tumult.) Why was he saying all this? (Profound silence.) Simply because he would like to know where these men were bred, these sterling fellows whose exploits were unequalled in all military history. Were they athletes, men of the open air, men of leisure? No; the vast majority came from the factory and the slums. The secret of the spirit of patriotism, duty, and courage was not to be bought with a pair of dumb-bells, roared

the General, it was inherent in the sense of freedom so imperishable in the audience he was addressing.

The General sat down abruptly, and it was evident that if the audience was not actually responsible for the dissolution of the Ministry of Recreation it had made it inevitable.

III

The Minister and Richard Pennington sat disconsolately in a corner of the lounge, and there James left them, and walked into the reception hall. It had become increasingly apparent that the tide of official urbanity had long since turned, and already it was rumoured that John Humbleford was on the point of resignation. Only Richard Pennington, however, was aware that Mr Winterton, in acute alarm at the feeling in the country, had pressed a baronetcy upon the Minister, and that John Humbleford had curtly turned it down.

Brooding upon the insecurity of all human affairs, James was suddenly faced by Pandora. She simply stood smiling a little pathetically, looking rather tired, the reception office clerk extending the key of her room.

'You?' he said.

'Just me,' replied Pandora. 'Can you get me a cup of tea, James?'

'In the drawing-room,' he said quickly, and disappeared. At that moment Uncle John was stating, to the horror and dismay of the Permanent Secretary, that he would go down with the ship.

'Tea's nice,' remarked Pandora. 'Isn't it cold to-night?'

'Scrap all that,' said James sharply. 'Are you alone here? Tell me——'

'Quite alone. I decided to leave just ten minutes before the train was due to pass the bottom of the wood. If you wave a flag it stops. I couldn't stick it. I bolted——'

'Bolted?'

'It was too much, James. Poor Michael——'

'You've turned him down?'

Pandora nodded ruefully.

'He was too wonderful,' she said sadly. 'I suspected it long ago, but then I thought how amazing to be the wife of a man who is his own biography, with all the beautiful letters and verses and everything complete. But it made me dizzy, James. And the place. A castle with a loch and surrounded by enormous black mountains. We were to live there always. The rain outside, and Michael always thinking kind considerate little things or reading or talking in a room like a Christian catacomb. You won't understand, James. I know I'm a poor creature. All I want is to be invisible. I'm horrified at myself. I wish I was a chameleon and could sneak about on cushions for people to sit on——'

'Was Craig very cut up?'

Pandora hesitated.

'I suppose so.'

'But surely——'

'It was all so perplexing, James. You see Michael had told me so often he had always been unhappy—not miserable, you know. Just quietly melancholy. Like a beautiful bird with one tragic note. And I thought I would make him so different. I saw myself bringing Michael out. But somehow it wasn't a success. Michael held back. He seemed to miss something. He was a dear, but he had it on his mind. And so I—you know. And he took it splendidly. He brightened up at once and said he would never be the same again and seemed to know where he was once more. Just as though

happiness—for he was trying his best to be happy—made him rather uneasy and apprehensive. He was sleeping peacefully on the couch when I left. . . .'

'Perhaps it's as well——'

'You see he never knew me. I'd always have been something that never was. And now whatever people say or think or wherever I am there'll be one place—you know. Or is that very selfish? Lackaday, I'm tired. I hardly know what I'm saying. . . . His mother was dreadful, and his father stalked about after me with deeds and a pen. They wanted us to have a place in Skye and about a million a year. I saw they would never understand, so I left. I waved that magic flag, the train pulled up, a guard said something in Scotch, and I crept under the seat of a "Ladies Only"——'

'And so Pandora came south.'

'Pandora came south.'

'And what now?'

'I suppose I'll return to the Ministry. I still have a bit of money.'

'The Ministry is tottering to its last sad end. The game's up, Pandora. The meeting to-night was a fiasco.'

He broke off with an exclamation.

'My mother!' he said. 'Coming in. Now, what in the world——?'

Mrs Fullerton hurried across the room.

'James,' she said. '*Grandmamma*——'

There was a long silence.

'This is Miss Pennington,' he said suddenly. 'Take some tea. I think I ought to fetch Uncle John——'

He went quietly from the room. In the lounge the Minister and the Permanent Secretary were both staring into a future which held no sense of comfort.

'Excuse me, Pennington,' said the Minister, but the Permanent Secretary had lost touch with formalities. He was ageing all the time.

And so they were together at last. John Humbleford, Pandora, James, and his mother.

'Pandora,' said James, speaking rather like a family solicitor, 'I must be frank. If I seem to have been secretive do not jump to hasty conclusions. This is a time to take broad views——'

He stopped abruptly. He had a ridiculous idea that Pandora had exchanged a smile with his mother. That Uncle John was quietly amused.

'Dear James,' said Pandora affectionately.

'We should have told,' said Mildred, 'but if it seems secretive do not jump to—you know——'

'You always loved mysteries, James,' said Pandora. 'You were the noblest official of us all. That is the sadness of this wretched business. If the Ministry goes it loses a promising Permanent Secretary. Or could you stay?'

'I don't follow,' he said coldly.

'It's all been for you, dear,' murmured his mother.

'All what?'

'You tell,' said Mildred to Pandora.

'There's not much to say except I committed the murder. That's how detective stories end, isn't it? I mean I thought, dear James, it would be nice for you to be in the Ministry where we could keep an eye on you. And so I asked Uncle John——'

'You knew——?'

'Of course. And your mother and I talked it over at Abbey Road the afternoon I left Shooter's Hurst. We did it for the best, James. We nearly lost you altogether. There was that day you talked—how you talked—at the Ministry. You remember?'

'I do,' he replied shortly. 'It was a symptom——'

Mrs Fullerton turned.

'John,' she said, 'Grandmamma——'

'Poor old soul,' he murmured, 'after all——

'I know. But it's rather awkward——

'What?'

'Her will. The solicitor sent me up; it's urgent.'

'Urgent?'

'And—well—eccentric——'

'I feared so.'

'Putting it quite simply, Grandmamma leaves her money—about two hundred thousand—between you and James and me——'

'There's nothing eccentric about that.'

'But in trust——'

'Oh——'

'She was, you know, greatly interested in a tribe of savages in the South Seas called—I forget the name. She has been in close touch with them for many years. She believed that there was a great future for this people if properly organised and directed. They are, of course, very primitive in their habits——'

'Never mind their habits, Mildred—what's it all amount to?'

'Simply this, that the money must be expended for the benefit of these cannibals.'

'Who said cannibals?' asked Uncle John sharply.

'Did I say cannibals? But they all are there.'

'And why is the matter urgent?'

'Because only one ship lands there in six months. At least, something like that, and any one mad enough to accept must start at once. Of course, the whole idea is absurd——'

'Is it?' mused the Minister aloud. 'Now, is it?'

'The South Seas,' crooned Pandora.

'The South Seas,' echoed James, and reflected. 'In time,' he considered, ignoring Uncle John altogether, 'in time she will come to admire me, and the locality sounds isolated and non-competitive. I shall purchase a set of Stacpoole and recline on the warm and fragrant beach like they do on the jackets of his novels, only, in

view of my official status in the island, more responsibly attired. And none will, on those magic shores, have ever heard the name of Fullerton. I shall live the secluded life of a potentate awaiting with quiet optimism the arrival of Hiram Sumpter.'

Uncle John still sat a little forward, gazing into the middle distance of the outer hall. And Richard Pennington, drooping past to bed, heard again and for the last time, that impassioned voice pointing once again the road of progress and the betterment of the human soul.

He paused, unnoticed, a figure of the past.

'This is a great, a divine trust placed in our hands,' remarked the Minister. 'It is one that demands acceptance, and no personal or petty interests must block our way. When I heard of it I said "No—this is too bizarre, too perilous, too extravagant. To throw up such a post as mine on the very eve of—er—of in fact, great events, would be madness—suicidal madness.' But on the other hand, here is a chance of making history. A primitive people you say——'

'Both Mr Jaegers and Mr Lilliecroup were eaten,' murmured James.

'Missionaries?' asked Uncle John musingly.

'As you say. But the epidemic passed. It might, however, occur again.'

'In life,' said Uncle John nobly, 'there must be give and take. Every nation was, in the dawning, a primitive, let us say an impulsive people. Are we, because of accidents due doubtless to some indiscretion, to turn our backs upon a great duty and the possibility of very substantial and honourable emoluments? I can answer for myself——'

During these arresting remarks the attention of the Permanent Secretary grew increasingly strained. He began to see the hand of the Almighty working in strange ways.

'We're going,' said Pandora.

The three men started and stared at her with considerable interest.

'Me and Mildred,' added Pandora, 'we fixed it up——'

'When? How?'

'Just now. Mildred asked me——'

Richard Pennington made a spasmodic gesture.

'Pandora,' he said, 'your mother——'

'My dear Uncle Dick,' she answered, 'what could be more decent of me than to disappear. Think of all this Craig affair. Imagine mother and I taking our tea together in Sussex. But now——'

'Yes——'

'She will have such a worry as never was. People will say, "And where is Pandora?" and mother will reply, "In the South Sea Islands." There will be a pause, and the caller, rather breathlessly, will remark, "And her husband, is he well?" and mother, with a natural hauteur, will reply, "Pandora is King Cocoa's chief wife."'

'This,' said Richard Pennington, 'is very perplexing for me. I wonder if I ought to go too.'

'You know Uncle Dick is dying to come, but Uncle Richard knows better.'

'You are right,' he sighed. 'Uncle Richard knows best.'

In the silence that followed these words the voice of Uncle John was heard saying golden words.

'Did I not tell you, James, I had an instinct, a premonition, that there are tremendous things in store for us? Was I not right? Does not this promise to be the greatest adventure of all? Listen——'

CHAPTER XXV

'AND the next afternoon I left them, said Richard Pennington to his sister-in-law, and rising he walked over to the window and looked out upon the Sussex garden. 'I felt,' he added, 'that the future lay in their own hands.'

Lady Pennington, recently returned after a prudent trip to the Riviera, suppressed, with an effort, a growing desire to box his ears.

'But, Richard, what about Pandora? The thing is a scandal. I simply took the first train to Dover. The doctor ordered me away. I shall never look any one in the face again.'

'Come, Mary, I cannot allow the matter is as serious as that. After all, Mrs Fullerton is with Pandora, and—would you believe it—for a moment I was strongly tempted to go myself.'

'You, Richard? To go to that island.'

'My dear, we don't know anything about the place. And after Edinburgh . . . Or it may have been the state of the Ministry. No, I must be candid, it was neither.'

'Well?'

'There is something about John Humbleford. I often think of him. Sometimes in the office I find myself hazarding what he is doing. Strange personality. . . .'

'He was no better than a charlatan.'

Richard Pennington frowned at the garden. Then,

pacing towards her, he said rather sharply, 'Please permit me to proceed. I take it you know nothing of the political situation since you left?'

'Nothing. I dare not look at a paper for fear Pandora——'

'When John Humbleford decided to resign I telephoned to Mr Winterton and just in time. That was the day of the great riots in Whitehall. The labouring classes demanded work. They said they would rather drive the country into revolution than be faced with compulsory recreation. They have now been granted a ten-hour day, and the crisis is past. Mr Winterton shut down the Ministry and accomplished a remarkable political coup. He stated, and produced evidence to support the statement, that he had permitted the Ministry to be founded with one purpose only—to *expose the fallacy of short hours*. His speech on the possibilities of attaining a sixteen-hour day has created a profound and steadying impression. It is, however, already evident that General Boulter will appeal to the middle classes to make a stand for the Sabbath rest. He is backed by all the religious denominations, and is causing me some anxiety, not to say worry.'

'You, Richard?'

'Yes, you see the Ministry of Recreation is now the Ministry of Concentration, and I am the Minister. Mr Winterton is convinced that the development of the national will to work——'

'Yes, yes, dear Richard, but the other matter?'

'I can understand your feelings, Mary. I know how it must have upset you. That last day before they sailed was very painful. My interview with the Craigs——'

'They have written me a monstrous letter.'

'It was so difficult to explain Pandora's action to them. They simply don't make allowances. They were furious. It was only by the wish of the son that no

action is being taken. They made a great noise and abused us all.'

'Dreadful.'

'No, I was curiously indifferent. I cannot explain it except by saying that perhaps I was impressed by the unreality of the whole scene. . . . Pandora, mildly interested but inscrutable, James Fullerton, a most baffling young man, quietly amused, Humbleford staring through them towards, I doubt not, that amazing island in the South Seas. I ventured to expostulate with these Craigs, but no one heeded me. They spoke loudly and together, and they might just as well have been abusing Poets' Corner in the Abbey. When they had said all they desired to say they fell with outbursts of dying thunder into silence. And still the Fullertons and Humbleford watched them with profound indifference, and Pandora with that remote, unfathomable scrutiny. So at last they left. There was nothing else for them to do.'

'Most painful,' said Lady Pennington, who was burning at the memory of her absence. 'I am terribly shocked. Pandora apparently has no natural feelings. This boy——'

'Michael Craig? Yes. Yes.' He smiled his discreet, slightly malicious smile. 'James Fullerton remarked to me that Michael Craig had been on the lookout for a secret sorrow all his life. Now he's got it.'

'Richard, how can you be so cruel?'

'It was Fullerton. He always struck me as cynical, but if Pandora marries him——'

'Marries Fullerton?'

'Why not? He is rich now. He is in love with her. I don't quite see who else she can marry. Except, of course, Humbleford.'

Lady Pennington shook her head.

'You don't know Pandora,' she said heavily. 'You can't dispose of Pandora as simply as that.'

Richard Pennington rose and tramped reflectively back to the window.

'And so I saw them off,' he said. 'I watched the ship go out with the tide. It was a still, unforgettable evening. They stood together, those four, waving, and I waved back. Then Pandora alone. I could see her white skirt and . . . It was all so unusual to me, Mary. Romance does not come my way. I shall always think a little sadly of that land of sunshine, that unknown country where they are now. We shall only hear of them at long intervals. How one envies them the long slumberous days out of a world of unrest and turmoil amongst that simple, pastoral people.'

'Yes, Blinkhorn?' said Lady Pennington.

The butler held an evening paper in his hand. 'Beg pardon, m'lady, but my eye fell upon a paragraph in Mr Pennington's paper. I took the liberty of marking it. With a pen, m'lady.'

'Read it, Blinkhorn.'

'"The homeward bound s.s. *Aquila* reports that when within a hundred miles of the Bu'Longu Isles a message was picked up indicating a sudden and alarming outbreak amongst the inland tribes. A gunboat is on its way. . . ."'

'There,' said Lady Pennington, with melancholy triumph, 'didn't I tell you so?'

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ADAM OF DUBLIN: A Romance of To-day

By Conal O'Riordan ('Norreys Connell')

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THE author of this novel has, from time to time, as his somewhat infrequent books have appeared, earned praise that was never faint from the leading critics of the day. Wells, Shaw, Conrad, Zangwill, Edward Thomas, Henry Davray, have testified in turn to his humour, his graceful wit, his sincerity of observation. He is one of the rare authors who have published too few books. Unfortunately the stage, the Abbey Theatre, Dublin, has occupied too much of his time. He has been called by more than one critic, a genius. It is certain that no other writer could have created *Adam of Dublin*, with its firmly humane and even exalted handling of scenes which a lesser man might make simply painful. But it is the delicious humour, the palpitating vigour of this picture of Dublin to-day, of all ranks of society as seen through the eyes of a child raised from the gutter, that makes the primary appeal of the novel.

CHALLENGE

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ALL the glamour and brilliant sunshine of the Mediterranean illuminates this author's second novel, in which she describes in her own finished manner a revolution in the Greek Islands. The period of the story is the twentieth century, and the dominating figures are the young Englishman and his passionate, beautiful cousin Eve.

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